

**Art and the Toxic Politics of Waste: Latin America—A Roundtable
Discussion with Filmmakers and Researchers
at University College London**

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Martín Oesterheld (Los Andres Cine; dir. *La multitud*, 2012)
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Event Transcript¹

Geoffrey Kantaris: It is a huge pleasure to give my reaction to the two breathtaking documentary films we are watching for this week’s event, tinged with sadness for the enormity of the waste that the films portray: both the physical waste piling up in mountains of trash, and the wasted lives left behind by a broken economic system. Although these films were made many years before the current worldwide pandemic, they bring into stark relief the brokenness of a system that relies

¹ Transcript edited for clarity.

structurally on the obsolescence of commodities and the obsolescence of whole populations of human beings condemned to eke out their lives in the nooks and crannies—or the derelict wastelands—of that system.

Estamira was filmed in what was then one of the largest landfills in the world, the infamous Jardim Gramacho, which was closed in 2012, about a year after the death of the film's protagonist, Estamira. Estamira Gomes de Sousa spent about twenty-four years of her life, on and off, working in the Gramacho landfill, an experience which provided her with an extraordinary outlook on what I am tempted to call the devastated afterlife of the social—by which I do not mean a spiritual afterlife, but the material afterlife of the things which bind and separate humanity in equal measure. She provides us with something like a film negative of the materiality of human relations.

La multitud, which means “multitude,” was filmed in and around two iconic abandoned amusement parks in Buenos Aires, the Ciudad Deportiva (or “Sports City”) of La Boca, to the south of the city with its nearby shantytown Barrio Rodrigo Bueno, and the Interama park with its soaring Torre Espacial (or “Space Tower”). Because these spaces are in a very real sense haunted—seeing them, we cannot fail to visualize in our minds the multitude of people who once passed through these parks—I would say that we also experience these spaces emptied of humanity as representing the afterlife of the social, creating an intense nostalgia and desire for everything that is lost. And, given its photographic quality, this film too acts in the mode of a photographic negative, inverting the place from which we consume it as spectacle.

I take the film *Estamira* to be a partnership between Estamira, the enigmatic refuse picker who requested that her vision and message to humanity should be filmed, and the director-photographer Marcos Prado, who patiently filmed and edited her story over a period of four years, producing something akin to a film-poem. It is no accident that Prado is an award-winning art photographer. This film, which arose out of a photographic project, is a documentary in the mode of visual and musical poetry. I am not saying that in order to wallow in some sentimental focus on film aesthetics or style over and above its urgent social message. Instead, it is to say that the two are more powerful because they are conjoined. I contend that if this film had been merely a film *about* Estamira, a subaltern woman suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, it would have been ethically intolerable. But as a film made *with* Estamira, one where she directs our gaze, commands it even, in order to convey what she called her “mission,” the film is transformed into something infinitely more powerful.

There are three aspects of *Estamira*—of Estamira’s far from simple philosophy—that I find particularly potent. The first is Estamira’s—and the film’s—strong ecological and economic message elaborated painstakingly at the heart of the incomprehensibly vast commodity graveyard that was the Gramacho landfill. The second is her own carefully worked out version of political economy. And the last is her take on human afterlives and religion. I only have time to touch on the first of these here, though it implicates the other two.

Karl Marx famously tried to imagine what our commodities would say to us if they could speak. Marx used the term “commodity-fetish” to refer to those frequently useless manufactured objects and gadgets that we are enticed to purchase, but that, often with built-in obsolescence, are destined in a relatively short period of time to be discarded on a garbage heap or placed in the fictive recycling bin, which is so often the same thing. He wrote: “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 exchange-value.”²

If garbage is the broken or decayed commodity that has fallen out of the sphere of social and economic exchange, then—along with Marx—Estamira prompts us to ask, “What would garbage say, if it could speak?” Estamira speaks for garbage, on behalf of it, in words that come from the other side of our broken socio-economic system. 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, because her world view has been shaped by garbage, and by the radical equality of all things in the spectral after world of the dump. This perspective may appear to us to be one that belongs to some dystopian, devastated far-off future, after the final implosion of our economic relations, but in fact her message is that it is immanent within this system, it is here and now, increasing in visibility, pressing up against our life-worlds. This helps to explain what she means when she says enigmatically: “The whole of creation is abstract. All of space is abstract. Water is abstract. Fire is abstract. Everything is abstract. Estamira also is abstract.” From the perspective of garbage, our whole reality is rendered abstract, unreal, or spectral.

While we listen to Estamira’s words, the camera roams across the devastated yet sublime scenery of the vast landfill, picking out details, moving in and out from amongst the garbage pickers, peering at the haze through the flaming

² Marx, *Capital*, 176-77.

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. She says:

This place here is a repository. . .of remains. Sometimes they are just remains. And sometimes you also see carelessness. Remains and carelessness. [. . .] 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 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.

Just to give you an idea of how meticulously the film is edited, on the soundtrack, Estamira's words are accompanied by a rising crescendo from a modern-classical score by Paolo Jobim, son of the renowned Brazilian popular musician Antônio Carlos Jobim, from the latter's album *Urubu*, the title of which means "vulture," or "turkey buzzard." A Brazilian audience would no doubt 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.

Returning to *La multitud*, this film also operates from the otherworldly perspective of the ruin. This is another film that could be a photograph album, lingering over paradoxical spaces that, like all ruins, evoke the very thing that is never actually in the film, only in its title: the multitude. "Multitude" has a slightly different connotation from "crowd," the English translation of the film's title. Edgar Allan Poe famously wrote an enigmatic short story set in nineteenth-century London called "The Man of the Crowd," which has the epigraph "This great misfortune of not being able to be alone." I think many watching this from lockdown may now laugh bitterly at such a sentiment, but it is one typical of the great metropolises of the past. The great megalopolises, or mega-cities, of the twenty-first century, of which Buenos Aires is one, are different beasts. They are machines of abstraction, converting places into spaces, disconnecting whole impoverished populations living in their hinterlands while prioritizing connection of the wealthy to the great financial machines and telecommunication networks of the global economy. Martín Oesterheld's great inspiration in this film is to have provided us with powerful visual metaphors of this process. The mega-city continually destroys space like some wasted commodity to make room for new profit-making development—the neoliberals quaintly like to call this process

“creative destruction” with no hint of irony.³ So we see the construction of enormous tower blocks in an extension being added to the upscale Puerto Madero district, which itself was once an abandoned dockyard and working-class district. By contrasting the derelict ruins of the amusement parks with these vast office blocks and high-rise apartments in the process of construction, the film reveals the enormous forces of abstraction that relentlessly remake our living spaces, enslave them to the machinery of profit, and just as easily discard them, turning them into an empty no-man’s land.

Well, it is probably impossible, as I think I’ve hinted, for us to watch these films without allowing them, anachronistically, to throw their haunting light on our own empty and devastated streets, our own social afterlives, as we grapple with a pandemic largely of our own making, one with which the global waste machine is deeply implicated. In both films, I think the immense forces that are concentrated in an urban wasteland become symbolic of the ecological devastation of the Earth itself. It’s fitting to finish with some of Estamira’s most haunting words:

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. 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, 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.

Marcos Prado: Now, let me do a little introduction on how my encounter with Estamira happened. I was working on a project called *Jardim Gramacho*, a photographic book with essays from some scientists: one talking about the mysticism of recycling, and the other, in the opposite way, about the effectiveness of recycling. It also included some interviews from characters that were not in the film, but who had something to say about their condition—the workers’ point of view. And I decided to do that book because in 1991/92 there was the Rio Summit, a big ecological encounter in Brazil. And there was a plan to un-pollute the Bay of Guanabara, which surrounds Rio de Janeiro, and Jardim Gramacho was right at the margins spilling all the toxic liquid inside. I resolved to do a visit there because I saw some pictures from Sebastião Salgado, one of the most important photographers of our time. In my first visit I got shocked with the size of the dump, the amount of people that were working, collecting and separating material (plastic, metals), mainly because there were kids working. The plan to depollute the Bay of

³ The concept comes from Joseph Schumpeter and is, from his point of view, core to the supposed “creative forces” of capitalism (with thanks to our anonymous reviewer, who highlighted the origin of this idea).

Guanabara involved transforming the dump into a landfill and organizing it by collecting the methane gas and the liquid that spills. And after eleven years, they were going to move to another place, because the capacity to receive garbage from Rio de Janeiro and its surroundings would be over.

So, I had a plan of eleven years of shooting people and the process. And on the seventh year, I decided to approach people more directly. I had taken pictures of people, of course—but it was a very dangerous place. There were more than 2,000 people working there, among them workers who were not encompassed by the market anymore. Engineers—all people that had spilled out from our unfair economic system. There were also some traffic dealers, there were people who escaped from prisons. So, I decided to approach the elders first. That is how I met Estamira and asked her for a portrait. We talked for forty minutes. And from that time on, Estamira never left my mind again.

I left the dump, went home, and started thinking about that lady. I wanted to film her story and understand why she moved; why she lived in that place for twenty years; what happened in her life that made her to choose to be there. Because it was a choice. And she was pretty happy there. After a month, I went back to the dump to invite her to participate in a documentary, but she was not there. She used to spend two or three weeks sleeping at the mountain, in the open air, under the rain and the sun. There were no houses. . .and she denounced some people that were stealing the elders' work, the selection of material featuring older people, to the security in the morning. So, the next night, two guys decided to beat up Estamira, throw some stones at her, and she was hospitalized. While she was in the hospital, a doctor told her to go to the psychiatric public system because he found her speech pattern was a little bit strange. Two hours later, she was starting to take some extremely dangerous medicine. When I met her a month after that, she had started doing this treatment of really powerful drugs.

I finally found the house where she lived, and said, "Estamira, do you want to participate in a film? I want to tell your story, I want to understand your past." And she told me, "I was expecting that my whole life." So, this film happened because there was the encounter of maybe a crazy photographer/filmmaker, and this person with this incredible creativity, a power of expressing herself, creating concepts that have been debated by many famous [thinkers]—Nietzsche, Foucault, you can name it. She was a real philosopher. Even without much instruction.

And I was fascinated with the possibility of trying to discover her past. It was a very hard job to do because I spent four years filming her, following her on and off. Until the middle of the second year, I was trying to convince her family to

be interviewed. I was just filming Estamira at the garbage, and all her thoughts, her sayings. But without understanding, without knowing how to do the film about it. Yet I was really fascinated with her speech, her cosmology. In the middle of the second year, I was at her place, and she came to me and said, “Marcos, do you know what your mission is? Your mission is to reveal my mission.” So, it is to do this film well. In addition, at the time, the relatives finally got confident in the work I was doing and decided to participate in the film. That was crucial for seeing the door of a narrative story, returning to her background and trying to match some of the stories that she already told me at the dump, but with the family also affirming what was going on with her.

Patrick O'Hare: So, *Estamira* engages with the links between mental health, sexual violence, autonomy, and religion. But I think that it also contributes to a re-evaluation of landfill life and labor, in which anthropologists like myself and Kathy Miller—who conducted research at Jardim Gramacho—also play a part. It makes the viewer consider the role of Gramacho in Estamira’s life. We are told at one point that her children succeed in persuading her away from the dump, yet later in the film her daughter noticed that her mental health improves after she returns. Estamira herself, whose many tongues and accounts are placed center stage by the director Marcos, tells us that she loves her work at the dump, and that the only luck she has had in life is encountering *senhor* (“Mr.”) Jardim Gramacho, the landfill.

Estamira is far from the only one to have this attitude, though; Miller, too, in her own work, asks why people who have the possibility of formal work return to the dump. I have argued that this is because landfills can enable autonomous ways of life and function as a refuge, in Estamira’s case, from the confines of a mental institution. Indeed, I have taken this further, arguing that landfills and waste can function as a commons, available not to everyone but to those vulnerable subjects who might struggle to earn a livelihood elsewhere: single mothers, widows, recently arrived immigrants, persecuted ethnic minorities, and so forth. However, this is not a pristine natural commons, but an urban, artificial—and indeed, often toxic—one that is in tune with our contemporary Anthropocene predicament.

Clearly landfill labor involves dangers and hardship. But I think that the film also shows moments of tenderness and care between *catadores* (scavengers), such as Estamira, João, and Pingelito that I also encountered in my own field site, e.g., the joking that arises from ludic objects found in the trash, or the cooking and sharing of recovered food together. Although many films in this series focus on landfills, a lot of these are now sanitary, enclosed spaces that fence in ex-

commodities, restricting access to waste pickers. Indeed, there are many—often multinational—pressures to move away from landfill altogether. These initiatives use images of precarious toxic labor to sell supposedly new and environmentally friendly waste-to-energy solutions. However, these new *vendedores de humo*⁴ are often silent about how to replace the role that waste plays in enabling autonomy for society's vulnerable fringe.

In my activism with the Brazilian National *Catadores* Movement, our central concern was the threat of *incineração* (incineration). This is a different kind of *fogo* (fire) from the redemptive one to which Estamira offers herself towards the end of the film—one that is not necessarily for the good of humanity, but which still destroys everything in its path: lives, livelihoods, things and affects, reducing them to nothing but dust.

La multitud also stirred affects in me, from my days living in Buenos Aires, when I used to seek the fresh air of the Costanera Sur, the coast of the Ecological Reserve on the fringes of the city—where I was intrigued also by the giant furry rodents, or coypus, that scurried under the feet of Lycra-clad joggers. Less personally, the position of the park cheek-by-jowl with the high-rise density of downtown Buenos Aires recalls Agnes Denes' 1982 environmental installation "Wheatfield," where she planted two acres of wheat on the former Battery Park landfill in New York, on what was some of the most expensive real estate in the world, soon to be built over. Rather than contrast, however, in *La multitud* it is more often interspersal of the natural and engineered, brought together in the concepts of urban nature and the feral, that prevail—whether the plants that grow around and inside abandoned cars, the birds that struggle to make themselves heard about the din of morning traffic, or the stray dogs that sustain themselves in the urban interstices. The uncontrolled, often unchecked nature of feral growth does contrast with the ordered (and now abandoned) spaces such as the Interama amusement park, constructed from blueprints and models. Interama is, furthermore, overlooked by the omnipresent Space Tower—a metaphor perhaps for human male control and mastery over an environment weighed down by cement and concrete, the bags of which we see being loaded from trucks.

One of the things that struck me while watching *La multitud* is the affective reaction to certain images of the Anthropocene, and how these might differ from earlier periods in history. For instance, the depiction of construction and window

⁴ A play on words between the Spanish idiom *vendedores de humo* or "smoke sellers" meaning tricksters (akin to the English language "snake oil sellers"), and the fact that the referred for-profit initiatives produce smoke.

cleaning workers, tiny dots against the mammoth buildings that they are in the process of assembling or maintaining. One-hundred and fifty years ago, skyscrapers—and, indeed, the ability to capture their construction in film—were new wonders of the world, feats of human ingenuity, and their builders were early heroes of urban modernity. Do such images of high-rise living stir the same affects now, however, given what we know about rampant urbanization, property speculation and inequality, and their role in environmental destruction?

Similarly, what do the images of rusting old cars, portrayed here on a scale that nods towards Edward Burtynsky's documentary *Manufactured Landscapes*, say to us now? As Adam Mentor writes in his book *Junkyard Planet*, dumped cars in the United States became a huge political and environmental controversy in the 1970s after an estimated twenty million cars were dumped in fields open, bodies of water, and city streets since the 1950s, causing pollution.⁵ “Few of America’s eyesores,” Richard Nixon told the U.S. Congress, “are so unsightly as its millions of junked automobiles.” The problem was soon solved forever with the invention of the automobile shredder. But what does the fact that dumped cars remain a problem elsewhere, fifty years on, tell us about global inequalities and inequities in terms of waste, and the management regimes that govern this waste?

By changing tack from the environment to its human inhabitants, I’d like to direct a more precise question to Martín. Both films have female protagonists, and something tells me that the woman who we see making her solitary way across spaces of abandonment in *La multitud* could perhaps tell just as compelling a backstory as Estamira. So, I was wondering why you chose to limit this aspect of the film, maintaining the viewer’s suspense about this character and her coffee-selling friend, with whom she reminisces about the motherland. *Muchas gracias*.

Martín Oesterheld: Yes! Her name is Ludmila, she is a Ukrainian migrant, and lives in the last shack of the Rodrigo Bueno settlement. She has a story that, had I told it in the film, would have consumed it. Ludmila is coming from an important trauma in her life, as she lost several relatives, including a grandson, in the Chernobyl accident. They lived very close to it, and she could never recompose her emotional state in Europe. Thus, she ended up in the late 1990s, through an agreement between the Argentine and Ukrainian governments, in Buenos Aires.

So Ludmila’s character is absolutely solitary, as she keeps only one friend. I chose to see with her eyes, the eyes of someone sensitive but also devoid of sociability (fragile, too; someone socially vulnerable also in the sense that she is at

⁵ Mentor, *Junkyard Planet*.

the margins of receiving any benefits from the state), the eyes of someone who is a stranger but also estranged from the context, the remains of a very particular Argentina. These are two abandoned spaces of what was meant to be, in their day, the future of Buenos Aires. This future included, for example, in 1982, a monumental tower which turned out to be one of the most ominous structures in the city, as it is its highest point is effectively a wasteland. When you enter this space, and you get into a virtually barren land, you are looking at the B side of Buenos Aires. It is a viewpoint where you see how all those promises of progress, from a political point of view, accumulated: an accumulation of cars, an accumulation of people. You see the whole landscape of the south of the city of Buenos Aires. And you are in a privileged place to see it: a wasteland on the fortieth floor. So, for me, this is the reverse of the city.

Gisela Heffes: I am delighted to be here with many colleagues and artists I admire very much. I watched, with a lot of interest, the two documentaries. While aesthetically they are very different, both feature a toxic narrative where a haunting past, in tandem with a hopeless present, intertwines with the political and ecological effects of social devastation. *La multitud* narrates the afterlife of two abandoned spaces: first, la Ciudad Deportiva, a sporting complex for the popular Boca Juniors football club first conceived in 1964, which included a giant stadium for 150,000 people in the Costanera Sur area of Buenos Aires. The construction took place during the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía, and the goal was to have the stadium inaugurated by 1975. And second, the Interama amusement park, created during the last Argentine military dictatorship. An emblem of authoritarianism, these 296 acres in Villa Soldati were opened to the public in 1982. Unlike *La multitud*, *Estamira* is not focused on the crowd or the absence of it, but follows the life of Estamira Gomes de Souza, who was born in 1941 and died in 2011. A sixty-three-year-old woman who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, she shares her life with a community of elderly folk at the waste site, where she also visits with her three children and grandchildren.

Both documentaries illuminate the different aesthetic forms used to represent the dynamics embedded in the politics of waste from a toxic angle. Curiously enough, despite their remarkable differences, both documentaries achieve a similar goal. One characteristic is how the use of categories such as visibility and invisibility are strategically deployed. In Oesterheld's documentary, people—the “multitude”—are nowhere. They are invisible, they are absent. Furthermore, Argentines are not present in the film, as if the intention was to erase

any explicit mark of national identity. We follow a Ukrainian couple whose dialogue is limited to the exact amount of words needed to communicate with each other, avoiding any possible excess. This scant conversation creates a correspondence between the minimalism of the geometric shots of abandoned buildings and construction sites. We know just enough about them and about the space they inhabit, as well as the current conditions they are facing.

For instance, from Ludmila's pitch we learn that the Rodrigo Bueno *villa* is getting more crowded. From her friend's observations, that the rent in the apartment where he lives, the working-class buildings known as Lugano I-II, is going up. The very few other characters in the documentary are workers who rarely talk. These workers, most likely immigrants, are the ones who are erecting the magnificent Puerto Madero towers, but at the same time, they build their own precarious houses in an informal space. When watching *La multitud*, one wonders, where are they? Where is the multitude? What could clearly signify the dream of an aborted future, the never-materialized splendor of the promised progress established from the ruins of violence, condenses instead an eerie emptiness that haunts us because it reminds us of the absence of those who could have been there but who no longer exist. By focusing on the void of a space populated by the obsolete, the documentary attains the magnificent feat of underscoring the ambiguous presence-absence of the 30,000 lives that were abruptly taken by the *Junta Militar* in Argentina.

On the contrary, Estamira is everywhere. Not only does she deliver philosophical discourses on several distinct issues (such as the state of humankind)—revealing the truth whilst sorting garbage in the mundane space of the landfill. But she's also very active as the main character throughout the entire documentary. Her presence, whose image goes back and forth between shots in black and white and in color, fills up all the sequences from the beginning to the end, rendering no possible emptiness to the audience. Her ubiquity is both physical and auditive. This ubiquitous presence (she would say, for instance, "Estamira is all around. I am here and there. And Estamira is abstract"), makes it clear that there is not only one Estamira. Or, if there is [only one], the multiple presences of Estamira flood the visual setting, stretching beyond the beyond, as she would describe it. Perhaps this ubiquity, of which she is aware, transforms her particular subaltern condition into a general one.

If Estamira represents the disposable—a "useless" life, like the many obsolete objects that were confined to the marginalized space of the landfill—, then obsolescence, as a category applied to the ephemeral life conferred by a society of

consumption, is everywhere. And by placing Estamira in the foreground, the documentary defies late capitalism's attempt to render invisible those whose existence is dim. *Estamira* makes it clear that poverty and marginality are also ubiquitous. In this sense, the documentary succeeds in reversing her spatial confinement into one of visibility and meaning.

The second aspect I would like to address is related to the politics of toxicity. In both documentaries, the presence of toxicity as a literal and metaphorical trope contributes to its further assessment from the perspective of environmental justice. By addressing this, I refer to the viewpoint that underscores inequality, underlying the equation of toxic wastelands with places inherited by minority and marginalized communities. From its onset, *La multitud* portrays long shots of chimneys and trucks releasing an ongoing stream of smoke. Sometimes the smoke expands to the point of covering the entire sky, devouring the space—including nature—and saturating the frames of the screen. There is no music in the documentary. Instead, we listen to birds chirping, which are juxtaposed with the loud sounds of tools and cranes, creating a soundscape that serves as a subtle reminder of the growing landscape of construction—a crucial part of the scheme of development in the postmodern neoliberal era in Argentina.

While the space is mostly inhabited, smoke penetrates the film's sequences as a spectral presence that expels the human from the physical built environment. If the space is emptied of the multitude, it is then inhabited by a crowd of non-human beings. From the obsolete vast structures that kill buildings and amusing rides (in the case of Interama), or the abandoned and ruined Confitería Nocturno, in the case of the Ciudad Deportiva, we can observe as backdrop the Villa Rodrigo Bueno, and, further behind, the luxurious residential construction of Puerto Madero. Toxicity, one may argue, entails a materially eschatological framed reality. This ghostly imagery of the end, condensed into a spatial portrayal that captures, multiple times, the past and the present, as well as the future that will never happen, is, in a similar and eloquent way, one of *Estamira's* most prominent critiques. Matter, like Estamira, is everywhere in Marcos Prado's documentary. The artisanal and piecemeal labor of sorting through garbage blurs the boundaries between space and body. Estamira occupies the landfill in the same way that the garbage she separates and collects occupies her body and her mind. Jardim de Gramacho is a "risk space," to use literary critic Ursula Heise's term. In these risk spaces, toxins are agents that erase the boundaries not only between body and environment, but also between domestic and public spheres, and between the beneficial and the harmful. The toxic space that contains Estamira, as well as all of humankind alike, has become—

according to her—lifeless. One of Estamira’s observations, towards the end of the first hour of screening, is that “the earth used to speak, but now the earth is dead.”

Through her quasi-mystical discourse, her dictum fits quite well with Rachel Carson’s warnings in her seminal book, *Silent Spring*, where she dramatized through a notable account the “growing planetary toxicity” and the possibility of an “uninhabitable planet.”⁶ Facing the fallout of living in a risk space, Estamira uses that unique stage to appeal to a scatological solution, which reminds us of religious purification and purge, as if a new fresh start was even conceivable. The only solution, she declares, is fire. Immediately after, she adds, “incinerate all the space, the beings, and replenish the space with other beings.” Coherently, Estamira realizes that if humankind has set itself up for an ecological devastation, then the appeal to new beings lays out the foundation for a novel new beginning—one that will replace the toxic politics of consumption and waste with another one, although this is not disclosed in the film.

My third and last observation is centered around the notion of graveyards, following the conceptualization of anthropologist Jason de León in his book *The Land of the Open Graves*, where he focused on the experience of migrating people who attempt to cross the border between Mexico and the U.S.⁷ These crossings are “neither random nor senseless,” but rather part of a strategic federal plan that uses space—in this case, the Sonora desert—as a “killing machine.” Here, the Border Patrol disguises the impact of its current enforcement policy by mobilizing a combination of sterilized discourse, redirected blame, and “natural” environmental processes that will raise evidence of what happens in the most remote parts of southern Arizona.

De León brings into focus the logic and human cost of the U.S. border enforcement monster known as “prevention through deterrence” —a strategy that largely relies on rock and desolate terrain to impede the flow of people from the south. Therefore, this particular landscape has become a killing field, a massive open grave. The intervention, or alternately its absence, of the state in Oesterheld and Prado’s documentaries also brings to the fore the cultures of the state which have become, as I mentioned before, a paradigm where the private and public spheres blend or perhaps collide. Landscapes, their past, present, and future, are fundamentally tied to questions of power and violence, human exploitation, and consumption.

⁶ Carson, *Silent Spring*.

⁷ de León and Wells, *The Land of Open Graves*.

In *La multitud*, the narrative is shaped by its visual assemblage, along with the soundscape of birds and construction. With its long shots of the debris that compose the lonely and ghostly presence of the two sites, the film examines the archaeological fingerprint of a social process where the residues of the recent past compose an alternative urban history. The semi-standing structures, rusty and dilapidated, have important cultural, historical, and scientific value—for they are artifacts, material traces that can offer new perspectives distinct from the dominant narratives, often written by those in power. They are not only the carcasses of the past—a past that held the promise of splendid future, as we, the audience, are driven into the cemetery of cars—but also nature: those weeds and plants, little by little, resume the process of re-absorbing the built environment. The contrast between the concrete and the moss, evident in the shots of the dissipating building structures, serve as a comment on durability and the ephemeral, but in subverted terms: while concrete in the documentary has turned into a transient witness of the past, the moss, the wheat, the grass, and other bushes become landmarks of permanence and perpetuity. The visual arrangements of these graveyards allow us to participate as members of the audience in the enactment of a controversial history because, besides producing alternative stories, the documentary can also tell stories in an alternative way—a position that encourages the viewers to revisit the past. In this sense, *La multitud* attains, as a visual narrative of these abandoned spaces, a critique that extends to the present.

This critique is also evident in *Estamira*. By choosing to narrate the misfortunes of her life, Prado decenters the story away from the perspective of outside observers. By focusing on this immense graveyard of human and material residues, it turns the physical evidence that is continuously fading—given the ephemerality of their lifespan—into memory, which is no less than an immaterial testament to existence. As with the subjects that are suspended as the presence-absence in *La multitud*, the subjects that inhabit the landfill also fluctuate within the liminality between absence and presence. The ruined Gulliver statue lying on the ground in the phantasmagorical Interama reminds us, as with the dead corpse of a woman discovered in Jardim de Gramacho, that this form of erasure, much like the disposal of dead bodies, is an inevitable endpoint of the violence produced by the nation state.

With this, I would like to conclude with two or three quick questions for both filmmakers in the spirit of igniting a fruitful and engaging dialogue. First, could each of you briefly respond to my observations? Second, I wonder how best to represent this trauma ethically while creating art whose aesthetic quality engages us

with its troubled and troubling history of violence and human exploitation. Third, what are the films or documentaries your work is dialoguing with? Off the top of my head, I cannot avoid thinking of two important films: *Boca de Lixo* [*The Scavengers*] by Eduardo Coutinho (1993) and, in Argentina, Pablo Trapero's short film, *Sobras* [*Leftovers*], which belong to the longer film collection *Stories on Human Rights* (2008).

Marcos Prado: I was doing some research. This film was done twenty years ago. And I was doing some research now: there are between 600 to one million workers in 3,000 open air dumps in Brazil. So, there are a lot of people who still depend on collecting material to make a living, to survive, to be able to buy food and medicine. There was a national law in Brazil that was supposed to close all the dumps in 2014. But they could not manage. There was no sufficient political force to do it. However, there is this new law that was just approved by Congress, stating that the dumps in big cities have to be closed within one year, and in smaller cities and counties by 2024. But what is going to happen? When Jardim Gramacho closed in 2012, there were about 15,000 people unemployed. The workers do not have any social security guarantees.

In terms of getting up to date on recycling strategies, I decided to film Estamira's story with that background: one of the biggest garbage dumps in the planet. And Estamira loved the garbage. She recreated herself, her identity, she connected with her friends, she made money. She overcame all her misery, all the rapes she had been through, all the prejudice for being a woman and black, betrayed by her husbands, and with the kids trying to put her in hospice. . . She was affirming life all the time. In the garbage. And I said, "God, the garbage is outside the dump, not inside the dump." Estamira proves that the dump is our society, our crooked values. And when the film was ready, I called her to watch her own film, so that she could say, "No, please don't show this," because I didn't want to mystify Estamira either, or mystify madness. I had to show her some very harsh scenes with fights with her son and her grandson, and some other situations. And then I said, "Okay, Estamira, please watch the film, if you have anything that you want to get rid of, do it now." And she did and she said, "Look, I recognize myself entirely in the film. I confess that I do not remember everything"—because it was five years' time shooting and editing.

And when it comes to how best to represent this trauma ethically, I think if you beautify poverty and harshness, if you beautify the dump, and you are talking about misery, you are talking about how harsh it is to be in the dump. I decided to

photograph the dump in a beautiful way because it matches with Estamira's cosmology. So, it's a whole poem. I even avoided showing the dead body that Gisela mentioned.

Geoffrey Kantaris: I have a question for both of you, Martín and Marcos, about representation of work. Both films have this powerful and absorbing representation of human labor, at the heart of these wasted spaces, whether it is the *catadores* in *Estamira*, or precarious construction work in *La multitud*. And the meaning of labor appears quite complex: a making and remaking of the world. Estamira is explicit that she believes in work, but not in sacrifice. Could you say something about the importance of this representation?

Martín Oesterheld: The other person that lives in the same settlement as Ludmila is called Viviano, a Paraguayan builder who works in the construction of the tower blocks. There is something particular in both of their situations, a social precarity, in that they both depend on their work in the towers as skilled labor to generate the income to bring to their family and expand the house. There is something that circulates in relation to needs, which is exploitation on the one side, but also the recreation of their own family futures. And when construction ends, that circularity finishes, and those family members cannot come back. What generally happens is that those really precarious units get sold at market prices. Thus, workers remain stuck in that cycle.

Marcos Prado: Gramacho involves three shifts with a twenty-four-hour role: Estamira says, “those are slaves disguised as the free man. In 1888, Princess Isabel freed slaves in current Brazil, but did not give them education and or means of work, so they end up here at the dump.” But I met many people who said they could earn some money, be able to have a good life outside, while other people who are in town working regular jobs were suffering and totally unhappy.

Geoffrey Kantaris: Marcos, could I ask about some of the aesthetic choices that you made in representing the space of the dump? Because you switch between black and white grainy footage—which for me has a kind of otherworldly spectral effect—and then color in other sections; but the color is also hallucinatory or surreal. Could you say something about these visual choices?

Marcos Prado: There was one important decision I had to make when Estamira started her psychological treatment: how to edit the film. I could make a film on subject matter. I could make a whole thing on the *trocadero* (trickster). But I decided to do it by days, chronologically, linearly, to show the progress of what the medicine was doing to Estamira. Everything that you see in color is Estamira speaking, interviewing at her place, going through the psychiatric place, and that is chronological. But I had to find an option to go back to her past. And on the second year, I got a gift of a Super 8 camera from a friend of mine. And most of the things that happened in this film were intuition.

Gisela Heffes: I just want to follow Geoffrey's question to Marcos regarding the selection of the shots, and to ask Martín the same question.

Martín Oesterheld: That is related to what I mentioned before: I wanted to bring the audience in through a curiosity [*inquietud*] generated by Buenos Aires, through the response that stems from confronting a desolate [*despojado*] landscape which simultaneously has a strong subjective signification. I was also interested in the film having a contract with fiction, in the city itself entering a fictional realm, in an organization of images that does not work in sequence but laterally, also evoking futuristic architectures. So, somewhere, that place of the fictional element clicked into those spaces of the 1960s and 1970s, and into how people back then imagined the future. I was interested, like Marcos said, guided by instinct, in transit, in people that move from one space to another. And I wanted to transmit, in that transit, a reflection about what they have left and where they are going. So, the aesthetics did not imply aesthetizing, but were part of that strategy created with the minimal tools that that film has.

Adriana Laura Massidda: Marcos, I am going to Gisela's third question about what other films your films are in dialogue with. I was thinking of Geoffrey, who wrote about *Estamira* a couple of years ago and, if I remember rightly, regarded it as the culmination of almost a style, like a tradition of cinema—of social cinema.

Marcos Prado: Yes, Coutinho was mentioned. He is a great documentarian in Brazil and did a film near Niterói—an open-air dump with the same people trying to survive by sorting materials. But that was not a film that inspired me, because I did not even know it back then. And his film is totally different. It is more about the people, the workers, and why they are there. Ten years after, Vik Muniz did

Lixo extraordinario, that is also an incredible film. But it is a tradition—because filmmakers tend to be related to things that bother them. If you stop and think that people are surviving on garbage dumps, that kids who should be in school are working there. . . it's a terrible thing. So that is why there are so many films about garbage dumps in Brazil.

Martín Oesterheld: I was left thinking about what Marcos said regarding a film that could have an enchantment, or an estrangement, of what is not seen, the spectral; of a city that has a different narrative than one which is linear. And I believe that that is the contract that the film has with the audience: precisely a tension between lived experience and fiction. Many of the comments I received about *La multitud* were from people could not believe that Buenos Aires could be portrayed in that way. And this is also the case in regarding the recent past, especially what involves me—I come from a family who was decimated when I was four.⁸ It is also a bit of a public family here in Argentina. From that, based on the possibilities that cinema affords me, I wanted to generate some kind of closeness, of presence, with the way of filming and with the audience. For example, in *La multitud*, the images push you to respond. For example, like Marcos said about the ghosts: I wanted to really *bring in* the ghosts, and put them there in the front, so that people will not look away. Although we are talking laterally about the dictatorship in this case, the ghosts are there. I have been asked, for example, if I recall having been in Interama, where the Torre Espacial is. And I do recall having been there once, queuing to get into the roller coaster or something like that, but I do not remember who I was with, nor whether there were many people. But what I do remember was that the fear I had, back then when I was five or six, about having to get on the roller coaster, remained in my memory somewhat impregnated with the fear implied in travelling back to the years of the end of the dictatorship and with that personal, family trauma. There is something that is imprinted in the body and comes together with that memory. And that is what I want to transmit with these materials, which are so unusual in the world of documentaries: to generate an almost bodily presence, often from absence, as a way of bringing those ghosts to the scene, invoking them at the edge of fiction, yet at the same time bringing a hidden Buenos Aires into view—a viewpoint that is uncommon in filmmaking and

⁸ Director Martín Oesterheld is the grandson of Hector Germán Oesterheld, the great comic book writer and creator of *El Eternauta*. Martín's grandfather and his four daughters, including Martín's mother, were among the *desaparecidos* ("missing people") who were illegally kidnapped, tortured, and murdered as part of the state terrorism sustained by the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983). There is a continuing campaign for truth, memory, and justice in Argentina to investigate these events.

documentary filmmaking, especially in relation to that contract that is made with the audience.

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