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**PICTURES OF GARBAGE**

AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PHOTOGRAPHER VIK MUNIZ AND  
THE GARBAGE PICKERS COMMUNITY OF JARDIM GRAMACHO LANDFILL IN BRAZIL

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## INTRODUCTION

Vik Muniz (1961) is one of the most celebrated Brazilian photographers around the world. Over his career that, in 2019, expands over 30 years, he managed to include his work in the collections of the major international museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art (New York) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (London). The level of his prestige is of the same size of the task he was attributed in 2016: he was one of the artistic directors of the Paralympic Opening Ceremony in Rio and produced a monumental puzzle on the stadium lawn with photographs of the athletes.

He grew up during the Brazilian dictatorship and was influenced by artistic movements of left-wing biases in the 1960s like *Cinema Novo* (New Cinema) and *Cinema Marginal* (Marginal Cinema) that claimed for social awareness and from which he borrowed important part of his imagery. He moved to the United States of America in the 1980s and near the turn to the 21<sup>st</sup> century he started to be perceived as a valuable piece on the realm of art market with its galleries, marchands, critics, marketers, collectors and auctioneers. Therefore, I think it is important to analyse one of his most recent series called *Pictures of Garbage* (2008). It has been widely acclaimed as a work of a photographer in a community, but this alleged activism seems more suitable with the interests of the neoliberalism era than with community photography concepts that took place in Britain during the 1960s, for example. According to ArtsHub's Performing Arts Editor Richard Watts "There is no outside to neoliberalism. If you believe the end product of our activity is manufacturing content for the art industry then you will sink with that particular business model" (2019). Due to the existence of a film called *Waste Land* (*Lixo Extraordinário*) (2010) by Lucy Walker which documented the production of *Pictures of Garbage*, the relationship between the artist and a group of recycled waste pickers were exposed and provided us clear evidences of the relationship between Muniz and this community.

The first part of this essay will introduce the origin of part of Vik Muniz's imagery and how it was reconfigured to fit under the ideals of the neoliberal moment. The second will compare some concepts of photography in the community in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s with analysis of scenes of *Waste Land* that were recorded between 2006 and 2008. Even though Muniz is not credited for the direction of the movie, the director herself affirms that he "was the catalyst for the film – by accompanying him to Jardim Gramacho I was able to gain confidence of the *catadores* [pickers]" (Gritten, 2011). For this reason, *Waste Land* is being used as a reference for this text.

## VIK MUNIZ AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF HIS BRAZILIAN REFERENCES

In one of his many interviews Muniz states that his appreciation for photos with double meaning is probably a heritage from his Brazilian background. “I’m a product of a military dictatorship<sup>1</sup> ... Under a dictatorship, you cannot trust information or dispense it freely because of censorship. So Brazilians became very flexible in the use of metaphors” (Kino, 2010). The dictatorship in Brazil stimulated left-wing artists in promoting social activism by using an imagery mainly based on marginal citizens, hunger and garbage. These primal influences will appear regularly in his production with different connotations.

### The Metaphor

In fact, his photographs are metaphorical insofar as what we see is exactly what we fail to see. “I want to create the worst possible illusions . . . to give people a measure of their own belief” (Phongsirivech, 2016), he once said. A significant part of his images are recreations of art historical works, portraiture and landscapes using eclectic materials such as chocolate, sugar, dust and garbage, that are only visible when we examine the picture up close. They are “photographic delusions” (Baker, 2016) that in my opinion lose most of their power due to Muniz’s style. He affirms: “I want the pictures to be beautiful and I want them to be easy to look at” (Benedict-Jones, 2000). The historical social work of Lewis Hine against Child Labour between 1908 and 1912, for example, was translated into this cheerful and almost alienated composition with toys on the background.

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<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian military government was the authoritarian military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from April 1, 1964 to March 15, 1985. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_dictatorship\\_in\\_Brazil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_dictatorship_in_Brazil))



Figure 1. Shoeshine Boy, After Lewis Hine (2005) by Vik Muniz

### The materials

His attraction for the use of garbage, dust and other perishable materials can be explained by the influence from artistic experiments against the dictatorship that took place in his homeland during the 1960's and 70's. These were attempts to use the poverty and the Brazilian underdevelopment as a resource for powerful artworks. Probably, cinema was the field where these ideas emerged with more significance and innovative low-budget productions disseminated this new aesthetics. In 1965, the writer and film director Glauber Rocha published 'Aesthics of Hunger', a manifesto that explained the foundations of the Cinema Novo (New Cinema) movement and its compromise in forging a national identity far from the imposed imperialist discourse. For him, hunger was the most distinctive reality of Latin American society and he proposed its use "not simply as the main subject of its films, but also as a creation principle for a political cinema committed to the transformation of Latin American social reality" (Herrera, 2015). '*Deus e o Diabo na terra do sol*' (Black God, White Devil) is very representative of this period (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Still from *Black God, White Devil* (1964), directed by Glauber Rocha

Following Cinema Novo, the 1970's brought the Cinema Marginal and Rogério Sganzerla, another important Brazilian writer and film director. In 1968, the political repression in Brazil reached a new level of radicalization with the promulgation of the AI-5, a decree which suspended several civil and political rights. Some authors noticed the emergence of formal and narrative transformations in cinema that ended up being nominated as 'Garbage Aesthetics'. "A garbage style . . . was the style most appropriate to a Third World country picking through the leavings of an international system dominated by First World monopoly capitalism" (Stam 1995 cited in Herrera, 2015). In '*O Bandido da Luz Vermelha*' (The Red Light Bandit) before the protagonist kills himself in a dump he states: "When we can't do anything, we fuck up!" (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Still of *The Red Light Bandit* (1968), directed by Rogério Sganzerla

In *WWW (World Map)* (Figure4), a Muniz's triptych shows "how geopolitical inequities may be represented through material difference . . . powerful nations using large, central components:

oversized CPUs and boxy vintage monitors. Poorer nations are built from trivial stuff, electronic add-ons and peripheral componentry” (Schmidt, 2017:8). However, differently than *Cinema Novo* and *Cinema Marginal* that “used waste to indicate the precarity of the working classes [and] . . . to address post coloniality, poverty, racial oppression, and political strife” (Schmidt, 2017:18), he seems to elevate trash to “an aesthetic recuperation that opens the door to sensual appreciation” (Schmidt, 2017:9) and aims only to a ‘responsible profit’ for himself and the gallery that represents him. At the same time, reinforce his position of a kind of neoliberal Super Hero, a position he will regularly assume in his work within communities.



Figure 4. WWW (World Map) (2008), by Vik Muniz. Triptych of 149 x 102 cm (each panel)

### **Muniz’s social activism**

Social activism can be controversial, especially when we notice that it is business oriented and the photographer puts himself in a superior position inside a group of people. Normally, Muniz’s role is more like the ‘saviour’ or the ‘wiser’ and the relationship with those people lasts while data or material are being collected for his creative needs. *The Sugar Children* (Figure 5) was inspired by a trip to the Caribbean island of Saint Kitts in 1996. There he befriended a community that worked in a sugar plantation and one day, looking at the Polaroids taken in that place, he tried to understand “what made children look so luminous while their parents seemed so broken down. After realizing the difference was a lifetime spent working with sugar, he used the glittering grains to draw and form the children’s portraits on black paper and photographed the results” (Kino, 2010). Besides this, his dedication to social work has another perspective: the outcome of these encounters follows the



principles of commodity fetishism and market-oriented rules. The dust shines and the garbage does not smell anymore. It is like if the 'Aesthetic of Hunger' was turned into what the Brazilian film critic Ivana Bentes designated as 'Cosmetic of Hunger' an "antagonism of entertainment versus social critique that had governed Latin American approaches to filmmaking [during the 1960's and 1970's]" (Bentes, 2001 cited in McClennen, 2011).



Figure 5. The Sugar Children series (1997) by Vik Muniz

This outlook through Muniz's Brazilian references since the 1960s and the work he developed with some communities after moving to US are keys for the understanding of Pictures of Garbage series. In the next topic we will see how they can be contrasted with the concepts of photography in the community.

## THE PICTURES OF GARBAGE OF JARDIM GRAMACHO

In the same way that *Cinema Novo* and *Cinema Marginal* in Brazilian culture, the 1960s and 1970s in Britain staged social movements that opened the discussion of Community Arts and Community Photography:

art and activism were both renewed by the recognition that artistic and cultural expression was central to agendas of social change driven from below. Art (inclusive of theatre, video, murals, photography, silk-printing, graphic design) was harnessed as a tool of empowerment in projects which challenged dominant conceptions of legitimate cultural forms and sought to play a role in forms of political resistance at a local level. (Bertrand, 2015:3)

Indeed, as noticed by Macnab (2015), the 1970s and 1980s in Britain was a moment when 'experimentation went wild' and community-based photographic projects proved to be a social and political instrument to fight oppressive vertical power relations. Moreover, this transformation came along with an educational commitment in promoting to the participants understanding of visual literacy and showing them how ideas and relationships could be made meaningful. Regarding this point, paraphrasing Paulo Freire, Su Braden in *Committing Photography* (1983) concluded:

To teach those who do not yet know to learn in their own terms it is first necessary for the teacher to learn from the pupil about the pupil's own culture. In this way the pupil perceives that what is being offered is not a new culture, but a tool with which it will be possible to express the reality of the cultural world he or she knows. (118)

On the other hand, the 1990s brought a wide acceptance of neoliberal agenda and the institutionalisation of the work in communities. Under this new format, the social change started to be driven from above (instead of from below) and "lost its radical edge . . . in a way which fostered consensus and foreclosed contestation" (Bertrand, 2015:3). Similarly, the same inversion can be noticed in Vik Muniz's career. In a first moment, we have the artist that grew up under the Brazilian dictatorship in the 1960s, witnessed the effort of some artistic movements which empowered the marginalised population, observed the imagery in circulation based on dust, garbage and 'hunger', learned the use of metaphor as a way of expression and, even though he has never mentioned the educator and philosopher Paulo Freire as a personal reference, lived in a country where his ideas had started to be disseminated<sup>2</sup>. Finally, near the year 2000, after almost two decades living in the US, Vik Muniz finds himself in the gears of the art market. If "the neo-liberalisation of the arts seeks to frame art, creativity and our cultures in strictly economic terms", (Pritchard, 2019) he began to use social activism in some communities as a noble façade to increase his value in the stock market and not to see his art works reduced to simply consumerist objects. *Pictures of Garbage* series is the highlight of

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<sup>2</sup> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire was published in 1968.



this phase, and *Waste Land* (2010) will help in the analysis of the relationship of this photographer with the community of Jardim Gramacho.

In 2006, the magnitude of Jardim Gramacho caught Muniz's attention. This place was the largest landfill in the world at the time, with 321 acres, located in Rio de Janeiro. There he decided to "change the lives of a group of people with the same materials that they deal with every day" (Allen, 2017) only because the material to be used in his next series would be garbage. Strangely, the assumption he had of these community he wanted to help, was that "These are probably the roughest people [the garbage pickers] you can think of. They're all drug addicts. It's like the end of the line . . . It's where everything not good goes, including the people" (*Waste land*, 2010, 00:09:42-00:10:01). Differently than Daniel Meadows' project *The Free Photographic Omnibus* that, on autumn of 1973, took one year tour around England taking free portraits and collecting personal testimonies (Macnab, 2015:123), Muniz was not focused in social connections but in the successful selling of the works produced at Jardim Gramacho in an auction. For this reason, spectacularization and publicity are keys to the art market perception he wanted to seduce. All that is needed is an impressive scenario, a difficult achievement and someone to play the super hero role. Questioning his gallerist Fabio Ghivelder during a Skype conversation about the difficulty of this task, he has as an answer "I think it would be much harder to think that we are not able to change the life of these people" (*Waste land*, 2010, 00:07:46-00:07:54).

Moreover, community photography "corresponds to a philosophy of practice based on collective participation, emphasis on process as much as product, and accessibility" (Bertrand, 2015:9). When Muniz arrived in the landfill, he looked for the director of ACAMJC (Association of Garbage Pickers of Jardim Gramacho) that represented nearly 2.500 pickers. He introduced himself as "the Brazilian artist who is the most - I hate to say this - but who sells and is the most popular overseas" (*Waste land*, 2010, 00:19:14-00:19:22). Despite being a 'hero', the other part he will play throughout all the process is of the 'manager'. After almost two years of working, when he is celebrating with the pickers the selling of his art work in London, he hears from one of them: "I want to propose a toast to my boss" (ibid., 01:17:07-01:17:09). Muniz did not allow himself to be affected by their issues, culture and feelings beyond the purpose of labour. The voice of the community was seldom heard. During one interview with Valter, one of the pickers, he even stopped the conversation with Muniz and said "You did not ask me but I am going to introduce myself. I like introducing myself with my own voice" (ibid., 00:26:11-00:26:19).

“Just as the separation of art from everyday life is a product of the capitalist division of labour, the corporate and plutocratic takeover of the arts is inherently linked to neoliberal capitalism” (Pritchard, 2019). Muniz’s knows how a public auction affects the art markets and his motivation in undertaking *Pictures of the Garbage* is the monetary reward he can obtain from this environment. “I want to make portraits of the pickers and then sell them, all the money from the sale of the portraits will be given back to you. You will be able to do some things, to make life easier for the community” (Waste land, 2010, 00:19:35-00:19:45). Actually, the backstage of the construction of the portraits is the best metaphor to illustrate his relationship with the garbage community. There we see Muniz (and the art market he represents) on the top of a scaffold supervising the work of the seven pickers he hired as assistants to their jobs (Figure 6). Ironically, in one scene where the ACAMJC’s director explains the work of the pickers, it is impossible not see the resemblance with Muniz project and attitude: “It works like a stock exchange. They collect whatever the market demands at any given time. So the recycling wholesalers tell the pickers what they need, and then that’s what they collect” (ibid., 00:13:14-00:13:26). In addition, his option for ‘dressing up’ the pickers as western European paintings like Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793) (Figure 7) and Pablo Picasso’s *Woman Ironing* (1904) (Figure 8), references far from the reality of the subjects, exemplifies the ‘glamorous objectification’ these people were submitted to. They were commodified to be placed “in a recognizable museological context” (Schmidt, 2017:17). On the other hand, personalities like the British actress Elizabeth Taylor and the Brazilian soccer player Pelé were allowed to be ‘only’ themselves when their portraits were made in the past (Figure 9).



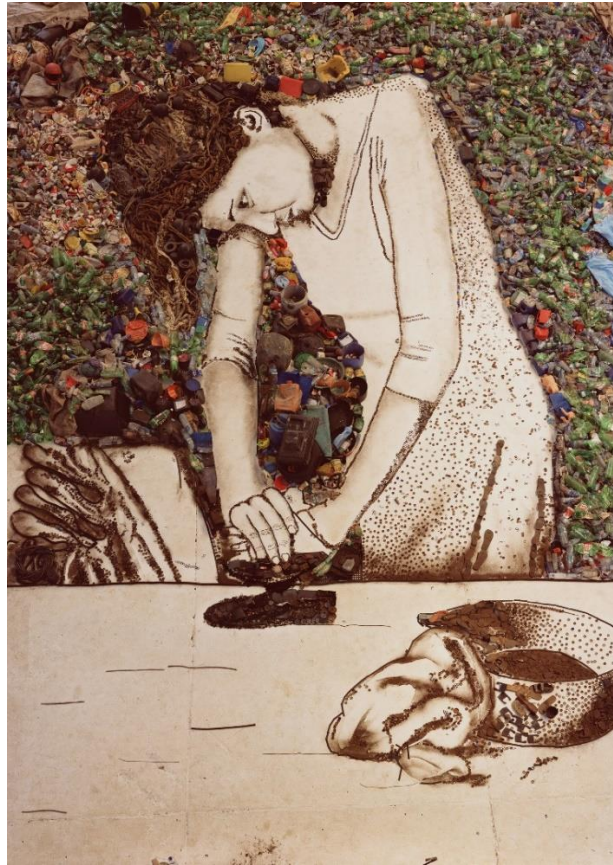
Figure 6. Vik Muniz checks the construction of one of his pictures with garbage.





Picture 7. Pictures of Garbage (2008) by Vik Muniz.





Picture 8. Pictures of Garbage (2008) by Vik Muniz.



Picture 9. Portraiture of Pelé in the Pictures of Magazines series (2003), by Vik Muniz (left) and Portraiture of Elizabeth Taylor in the Pictures of Diamonds series (2004), by Vik Muniz (right).

One last aspect to be discussed in this topic is about the authenticity of the outcome produced between the photographer and the community. Normally, the public interest for community photography is the originality of some images because “they provide insights into the quality of everyday life . . . different from the daily stock media images” (Bertrand, 2015:6). If by one hand, the pickers and the materials they work everyday are in these photographs, by the other, their culture, problems and expectations are suffocated under the mask created by Muniz and the financial structure that represents him. “Indeed, the entire project begins and ends with Muniz’s photographs, reinforcing the authorship that provides both the exposure integral to its success and the limitations for participant involvement” (Remland, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Taking everything into account, *Pictures of Garbage* series could not be considered a photography in the community case. Instead of using his potential as a photographer to educate a group of people with skills that would “enable creativity and critical thinking, where the camera becomes a tool for driving and documenting change” (Bertrand, 2015), Muniz operates a kind of cultural invasion, where a community was “neutralised by the stylistic conventions of the dominant culture” (Braden, 1983) and interests of the economic groups he represents . In the end, the process documented in Waste Land is more alike a marketing class where we follow an artist and his strategies to sell his work by the maximum economic value.

However, it would not be honest to finish this text without mentioning that Muniz’ goal was achieved and he raised USD 276.000 (Kino, 2010) with the selling of his artworks, which were entirely donated to ACAMJC. At the end of the process, if his seven assistants did not improve their power as a community they at least revaluated the labour itself from a dehumanized activity to a more creative and pleasurable one that was possible by their contact with art. In the world relations of work, people are treated like objects, and sometimes like garbage. Maybe this was the contribution brought to this group, this idea that Paul Willis (1990) called symbolic work. “Whilst society dehumanizes work, it sentimentalizes ‘Art’. So the ‘arts’ ignore work but are quick to condemn its ‘reliefs’ . . . Though only ‘fun’ and apparently inconsequential, it’s actually where their creative symbolic abilities are most at play” (15). Even so, it still does not configure this endeavour as photography in the community but at least offered some profitable experiences far beyond what money can buy.

**Word counting: 3,261**

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