

Film Review

Território do Brincar (Territory of Play)

A film by Estela Renner, Luana Lobo and Marcos Nisti (producers) and David Reeks and Renata Meirelles (directors). (2015).

Brazil: Alana Intitute. 90 minutes.

Project website: <http://territoriodobrincar.com.br>

Opening shot: a vast expanse of sand dunes in Nova Tatajuba, in the state of Ceará, Brazil. The wind is blowing, it is the only sound. The sun is low in the sky, the shadows are long, the shot is low. Into frame, at some distance, silently, comes a boy with a board. He sits on the board and propels himself down an enormous, steep dune. Another boy dune-surfs standing up—he is proficient. A smaller girl, close to the top of the dune and to the camera, rolls down, squealing, momentarily looking at the camera. Cut to a different landscape: a torrential downpour, where small children revel in the wetness of it, at ground level, sitting and splashing in deep muddy puddles as the heavy rain washes over them. There is the sound of the rain, but no sound from the children.

The Territory of Play (Território do Brincar) describes itself as a documentary that “weaves a tapestry out of the gestures seen in children’s play throughout Brazil” (back cover copy of DVD box). It is this and more. It is a thing of beauty, a work of art: the striking photography, the thoughtful sequencing, the sensitive soundtrack of original music and the (often small) sounds of children at play, all combine to create a remarkable aesthetic. Noticeably absent is any adult commentary; for me, this is one of the film’s great strengths. Of course, adults have labored over hours of footage to select material that weaves this particular tapestry, but they have not succumbed to the adult tendency to interpret, to impose meaning and value.

The film is one artifact from a much larger project “dedicated to listening, exchanging knowledge, documenting, and disseminating the culture of childhood” (project website). Filmmakers Renata Meilleres and David Reek build on their extensive research into children’s play, games and toys across diverse regions of Brazil over the last 15 years, including rural, coastal, indigenous and urban communities. The project is one of sharing this knowledge with schools and the public to show the rich culture, creativity and capacities of Brazilian children of all ages, from toddlers to teens. Included in the DVD pack are some postcards, each with a different picture from the research project, and the message:

You wouldn’t believe how many times we’ve heard someone say, ‘Kids just don’t know how to play anymore.’ It drives us nuts... For two years, our project documented the way kids play all over Brazil. We were so impressed with what we saw: the creativity, the grace, the vigor.

In additional material, the filmmakers talk of creating dialogue with the children, leaving them to decide what to show about their play cultures. The often close-range filming offers an insight into facial expressions, concentration, immersion, dexterity. There is a sense of awe at the knowledge and skills evident in this "territory" of play, a metaphor emphasizing how children's cultures are "another country" for adults, and also how landscape and culture are deeply interwoven. Consistent themes emerged from many hours filming across 19 communities and nine states, but these are fluid. For example, although there were often strict divisions between girls' play (making houses, playing with dolls, skipping, Chinese jump rope, five stones, etc.) and boys' play (making wheeled toys, sailing boats, guns, playing at heroes, hunting animals, etc.), these are often entwined mingle both through "border-crossing" (occasionally showing boys building play houses or involved in "small world" forms of play, or girls involved in hunting animals or playing on rafts) and through intersections (building a fire to cook the electric eel, enacting a baptism or a wedding complete with a feast and live music, playing the scary masked chasing game of Careta in Acupe, Bahia).

Children use whatever is to hand (natural resources, scrap the adult world has discarded, old broken toys) to play, build and create. They show great expertise in using tools such as machetes and hammers, needle and thread. They also show intimate knowledge of the landscape, of the movements and habits of birds and animals, and of the elements (much use is made of earth, air, fire and water). The mixing of ages shows how smaller children pick up this knowledge and expertise alongside older ones.

It is easy to be drawn in by the children's wisdom, skills and choreography, and by the sheer beauty of the images and sounds. The soundtrack, composed by Artur Andrés and performed by Uakti and guests, complements the images perfectly. I was also struck, though, by how much of the children's performances were imitations of adult "work," and rather serious. This may be because of the way the dialogues were set up, perhaps encouraging a focus on activities. There were some wonderful moments of immersion and of exuberance at success, and of reveling in embodied engagement (such as the playing in the rainstorm at the beginning), but there was very little of the sheer nonsense of some forms of playfulness, the kinds of moments that erupt opportunistically. Nor was there much evidence of the conflicts and power games that often emerge in groups playing together, or of darker forms of playing. It may well be that I am assuming such ludic phenomena to be universal when they may be culturally specific, but I suspect not. So, my very small criticism is that, in its laudable efforts to show children's capacities and competence, it may be partial and potentially over-romanticize children's play as inherently A Good Thing. Overall, though, it was a joy to see professional adult artists (filmmakers, musicians, etc.) taking children's cultures seriously and presenting them in such a beautiful way.

The filmmakers' primary target audience is educators, and they have worked with schools to create a dialogue about children's play. Additionally, the film would be of interest to all professionals working with children, to those teaching and studying childhood studies, and to ethnographers and anthropologists interested in cross-

cultural studies. The filmmakers are planning to extend their studies beyond Brazil. This offers up opportunities to showcase children's cultures in other countries where adults also think children have forgotten how to play. I wish them all the best for this project and await more such documentaries with eagerness.

Review by Wendy Russell

Dr. Wendy Russell is a Senior Lecturer in Play and Playwork/Professional Studies in Children's Play at University of Gloucestershire (UK) and a consultant on children's play and playwork. She has worked in the play and playwork sector for over 40 years, initially on adventure playgrounds and then in development work, research, education and training. She has worked with local authorities, the private sector and local, national and international voluntary organizations. Her research interests include children's play, playwork, the politics of space, social policy and ethics. She is a member of Editorial Board for International Journal of Play.

Director's Response by Renata Meirelles

At the 2017 Calgary IPA conference, I was enchanted with Wendy Russell's lecture about the work she had collaborated on with Stuart Lester (who had unfortunately passed away shortly before the conference). Russell outlined a philosophical process their team is using to reinvigorate play.

That desire to vibrantly experience play struck a significant chord with our work on *The Territory of Play*. Through the door of phenomenology, and with a strong emphasis on the corporeality of spontaneous play, we too have strived to create materials that revitalize this phenomenon. We look to how children's actions, often reoccurring across different cultures, can reveal collective memories, impulses, and archetypes—consequently affording us a window to all of humanity. To successfully portray a child's delicacy, fluidity, and vigor in relation to materials, space, and other children is to invite our audiences into a realm beyond rationality, and, not coincidentally, into the imaginative order of childhood.

Our project's travel itinerary gave priority to Brazil's interior so that we could focus on communities that were both under-represented in the country's national media and which were less influenced by the "distractions of modern-day life." We quickly realized that children with urban and non-urban lifestyles reflect the noise environment in which they are embedded.

We were in constant contact with a play quieter than that to which we'd become accustomed; so much that we allowed its gestures to drive our film's narrative. Our choice not to include interviews with play specialists was to reinforce the power of this silent expression. In the post-modern, Western society in which we live, syntax communication saturates existence, and hasn't spared childhood.

Brazilian childhood faces numerous problems, and many of our protagonists were directly affected. But, beyond the complications, we often recognized a potent life

force, and in children, play was its medium. Determining to see through this filter of optimism was to re-establish dignity to their actions. According to Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff, “the way we see becomes vastly important with respect to the world that we create through such seeing” (Kaplan & Davidoff, 2014, p.12).

In an eventual return to the field, we hope to portray the emotional processes lived through play with the same veracity we felt we were able to capture within gestures. We hope to film children from around the world set within a variety of geographic and cultural landscapes—another attempt to understand up to what point spontaneous play can be considered a universal language.

Currently, *The Territory of Play* has its productions available the Videocamp platform. Users can create an account and host free, public screenings through these sites:

The Territory of Play (90 min.)

<http://www.videocamp.com/en/movies/territorio-do-brincar>

Sacred Play (52 min.)

<http://www.videocamp.com/en/movies/terreiros-do-brincar-2017>

Waapa (20 min.)

<http://www.videocamp.com/en/movies/waapa>

And there are several short films available on our Youtube account:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/TerritoriodoBrincar>

Reference

Kaplan, A., and Davidoff, S. (2014). *Delicate activism: A radical approach to change*. Capetown, South Africa: Proteus Initiative. Available at <http://socialself.org/Articles/adelicate.aspx>.