
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Território Suape. Directed by **Cecília da Fonte, Laércio Portela and Marcelo Pedroso**. Produced by Marco Zero Conteúdo, Símio Filmes and Ventana Filmes. 2020. 70 minutes. Colour.

‘Suape Territory’ (Suape territory) is a feature-length documentary that explores the disparities regarding land occupation around the Suape Industrial and Port Complex in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil, and its consequences. To meet its objective, the film offers narratives of residents of the most vulnerable areas surrounding the project, along with interviews given by representatives of major real estate developments located in the region.

These two groups of characters, interconnected by their relationship to the Suape Industrial Complex, are presented to viewers based on their antagonisms. A wide range of topics of considerable interest to urban studies are addressed: inequalities regarding access to land, the environmental and social impacts of large enterprises, rights violations through forced relocation, and so on.

Residents of the poorest, most vulnerable areas of the city of Cabo de Santo Agostinho reflect on the urban violence that marks their daily lives and the ways in which they deal with this adverse context to create paths of personal and collective fulfilment. Those who were relocated as the Suape Complex was being constructed report threats and spoliation during the process as well as changes in family and work dynamics, in the way they live and relate to nature.

In contrast, two major real estate projects developed to support the industrial and port complex provided upper class

housing: the planned ‘Reserva Paiva’ neighbourhood, which is a gated community of luxury residential and commercial buildings, and ‘Suape Convida’, which is a planned city project. The speeches of the representatives of these projects — interspersed with promotional videos — underscore the dynamics of economic, social and political power that mark the viability of projects of this type. The documentary builds its discursive strategy essentially from the speech of the characters and elements that present the geographical and social contexts; there is no voiceover and intervening texts are minimal. This choice, which was possible due to the considerable skill both in the editing and the conduction of the interviews, can, however, pose difficulties for viewers less familiar with the context.

One of the film’s strong points is the visibility given to actors and speeches from the richest and most powerful social strata, which, in general, remain more guarded or absent from the critical debate regarding the impact of their ways of life. One speaks without the slightest constraint of the inheritance of vast tracts of land and the concentration in the hands of a few families. Moreover, exaltation regarding the partnership with the government in the planning of regulatory frameworks as well as in the construction of roads and bridges to ensure the viability of the project reveals that the élites in question unabashedly defend the wide use of public and collective resources for the maintenance of their exorbitant consumption and ways of life.

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Sunday. Directed by **Paulo Mendel and Vitor Grunvald**. 2018. 25 minutes. Colour.

The documentary *Sunday* depicts the participation of the ‘LGBTQI+ Stronger Family’ in the political protests that occurred in Brazil in the year 2016. The ‘*Fora Temer*’ protests denounced the Brazilian coup d’état that deposed elected president Dilma Vana Rousseff.

Paulo Mendel and Vitor Grunvald begin the documentary arriving in Jardim Nazareth, a district located in the East Zone of the city of São Paulo. They show us a little of the urban configuration before introducing the actors of this film: the ‘LGBTQI+ Stronger Family’. Thus, at the beginning of the documentary, we are presented to the urban scenario: soccer fields, graffiti on walls, and low-income residential buildings. We hear the shouts of vendors advertising and selling their products in the streets. The audio and video are perfectly matched to introduce the viewer to the actors that will follow in this documentary.

The ‘LGBTQI+ Stronger Family’ emerged in 2006 and currently has about 250 members who are part of an affective and political network, in which they fight against LGBTphobia. The concept of family appears in the work of philosopher Jack Halberstam, who shows us that the idea of family becomes central to the construction of alliances and solidarity relations between queer and trans people. The same movement is followed in the documentary *Domingo* from the perspective of the ‘Stronger Family’.

Mendel and Grunvald follow some members of ‘Stronger Family’ on Sunday 4 September 2016, during one of the largest

political acts against the coup d’état that deposed former president Dilma Rousseff. According to newspaper reports, the demonstration started peacefully on Paulista Avenue, one of the largest and most important avenues in São Paulo; then, the military police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the protesters.

Mendel and Grunvald show us the meeting at the headquarters, the preparation for the act, the route they take until they arrive at the act and the protest. However, after the first 20 minutes and until the end of the documentary, the members of the ‘Stronger Family’ are no longer the focus of the film. The confusion, shouting and violent dispersal of the political act take over. The main actors — the members of the ‘Stronger Family’ — get lost amidst the general confusion. I think it would have been appropriate for the closing to return to them and to the importance of their participation in the democratic protest.

The main goal of this documentary, is to show the participation of a segment of the LGBTQI+ population in the democratic acts against the coup d’état that occurred in Brazil in the year 2016. This documentary is of great value for urban studies, as it presents a fine urban ethnography. Moreover, it can be presented to academic and non-academic audiences. Finally, I would like to point out that, by dividing the main screen into two distinct frames showed concurrently, the filmmakers have successfully constructed — through open, medium, and close-up shots — a powerful narrative about the political participation of an LGBTQI+ group during democratic acts of protest in an urban scenario.

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Real Life. Directed by **Milena Perdikari**. 2020. 10 minutes. Colour.

Real Life is a portrait of a student spending her quarantine alone in Greece. Starting off with images of a bedroom and kitchen, the film sets the main backdrop: a home. The first scene introduces the main character: a young, dark-haired woman wearing a facemask — the first clue that the film is set during the corona pandemic. We then follow an encounter with her neighbour and learn that our main character is forced into quarantine by herself, as her family is stuck on a Greek island. This highlights not only the compulsory physical distance — accentuated by the facemask and gloves, it also shows that, in this film, the viewer might never leave the home.

Real Life is firstly a film about loneliness and how quarantine impacts our social relations. It is a visual portrait that lacks any physical intimacy or affection, in which all communication is either from a distance or online. Our main character seems to follow demotivating online classes, communicates with family and friends through her smartphone, and only gets a glimpse of other people's lives by peeking from her balcony into theirs. This is symbolized in a cliché image that we usually associate with bonding: a medium shot of our main protagonist eating dinner alone. The alienation is further emphasized in the observation that the food (usually a source of comfort) also does not seem to taste good. Between these relatively depressing scenes, our protagonist slightly lights up when escaping into another reality. We follow how she builds a strikingly identical avatar in the life simulation game 'The Sims 3'. Through this virtual reality,

we learn more about our protagonist's main dreams: biking around freely, having family dinners, and playing in the ocean with an elderly avatar we assume to be her dad. We also learn that our protagonist and avatar have a shared ambition: becoming a film director. After receiving positive feedback from her teacher on what we assume to be the script of the film covered in this review, the portrait is unfortunately rushed to an ending: in faster edited and higher saturated images, we see our protagonist on her roof terrace seeming more hopeful about the future.

Real Life could be described as an autoethnography. Firstly, one asks, how do we even make films in a pandemic when we are forced to stay in our homes? Secondly, the uniformity of the quarantine experience would lead one to expect *Real Life* to be about the director herself. In a pandemic, there is perhaps no 'Other'. Around the world, our days and experiences have probably never been so similar. With the repetitive movements of getting up, pouring coffee, sitting behind your desk with occasional breaks of pouring another liquid, all days seem more or less the same. Our perception of 'home' has changed, not simply because most of us are working from within our personal spaces, but also because what was private has now become visible to our colleagues as our Zoom backdrops. We can travel to other places only virtually and escape to self-created digital utopias, such as in *Real Life*.

Real Life sheds light upon the impact of the pandemic on ethnographic research, because our homes have become our main sites of research, including the digital field. The legitimacy of online ethnography as virtual ethnography or cyber ethnography has been based predominantly on the

increasing emergence of social groups and online forms of expression, yet it was long been received with criticism. At the start of the pandemic, however, countless researchers (and filmmakers) were forced to return from the field and alter or even cancel their projects. Additionally, a short Google search confirms that in the past year our online communication, use of social media and gaming has skyrocketed. With no clear end in sight, even those who are still sceptical of such digital ethnographic practices are forced to embrace them. The pandemic has changed ‘the field’ in ethnographic research for good. Lastly, I checked with the director and the film is indeed a self-portrait.

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Songs that never end. Directed by **Yehuda Sharim**. 2019. Produced by Sharim Studios. 114 minutes. Colour.

Poet and filmmaker Yehuda Sharim’s *Songs that never end* is an intimate, lyrical, melancholic meditation on home and belonging at a time of displacement and dispossession. The film is set in Houston, Texas and revolves around the experiences and everyday life of the Dayan family, who had — due to political unrest and persecution — fled from Iran first to Iraq and then to Turkey before arriving to the US. Told mainly through the filmmaker’s conversations with Ali — the Dayan’s charming, forthright 14-year-old son — and Hana — their affectionate, precocious nine-year-old daughter, *Songs that never end* is an unflinching yet deeply humane portrait

of a family struggling to find meaning in their new life as they come to terms with the devastation of their past.

The isolation of urban life is brilliantly captured through Sharim’s cinematography. The camera rarely zooms out of the confines of the family’s small suburban apartment, focusing instead on individual moments — the mother Samira listlessly staring into space, the father Abbas aimlessly watching TV with his twin toddlers beside him, Ali scrolling through his phone, and Hana sitting alone eating leftover rice. The sense of claustrophobia is heightened by the incessant crying of the twins and Samira’s pleas for assistance from Ali and Hana. Even the rare forays into the outside world do little to mitigate the sense of displacement. Ali and Hana are always alone when they run through the isolated neighbourhood at night and no neighbours drop by to visit or play. Hana declares, as she hums to herself and cleans a cupboard full of shoes, ‘I don’t know what to do; sometimes I do nothing [...] I like working’. Ali dreams of moving to another planet. The Dayan family trips to a theme park and the city only serve to illustrate how, despite the promises of freedom and unlimited consumption in the US, time and money are precious commodities for immigrant families struggling to survive. The film later reveals that Samira has lupus, is suffering from mental health issues, and can barely cope with managing the household and taking care of the twins. Abbas, we learn, had been a successful manager at an oil company in Iran, but, in the US, he has to work long night shifts and is too exhausted to spend time with his wife and children when he comes home. Through a focus on the domestic and the mundane, *Songs that never end* poses critical questions about the

weight of history and inequality as it collides with the longing for home and belonging. ‘I don’t like human beings’, declares Hana, ‘Because they have money in their pockets [...] but they don’t care about the person [...] who does not have money’.

Amidst the chaos and unpredictability of their immigrant existence, the film gives us a glimpse into a life that was and could have been. Abbas is a poet. Samira remembers every line of all the poems he has written to her during their courtship and marriage; she recites them to the camera in a spirit of serene joy. There are moments of deep affection and quiet companionship between them and the children. Through these moments of love and hope, *Songs that never end* reminds us that our human existence holds the potential for both beauty and brutality.

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Archivo Cordero. Directed by **Gabriela Zamorano**. 2020. 59 minutes. Colour.

Archivo Cordero focuses on ‘Fotos Cordero’ (Cordero Photos), Bolivia’s most emblematic photography studio. The documentary clusters objects, images, sounds and testimonies around seven different thematic categories — ‘Archive as Lineage’, ‘Montage’, ‘Framing’, ‘Belonging’, ‘Overflow’, ‘Trace’ and ‘Legacy’ — and explores the importance of this La Paz-based studio as a major contributor to the country’s national identity. The studio was founded by the acclaimed photographer Julio Cordero in 1900. Recently, the city government of La

Paz bought a selection of the studio’s photographs and objects related to urban development in Bolivia in the twentieth century. This collection will be housed at the country’s first photography museum.

The aim of director Gabriela Zamorano, a Mexican anthropologist and filmmaker, is to provide a glimpse into the historical memory of Bolivia’s social and urban development during the country’s liberal period (1899-1920). The film highlights the studio’s archival material, which includes glass plate negatives of urban scenes, black-and-white photographs of city dwellers, and the tools that were used to improve the developed photos.

Central to the film’s storyline is the testimony of Don Julio Cordero, the charismatic and elderly grandson of the studio’s founder. His difficulty in remembering his grandfather’s techniques initially tricks the viewer into presuming that he has a fragile memory weakened by advanced age. Instead, Zamorano demonstrates how Don Julio’s active memory labours, with obstinate force, to attach itself to objects and behaviours, and perseveres in its task to keep them from fading into oblivion.

Don Julio is portrayed lifting his grandfather’s negatives and placing them against a light bulb. Through this act of mimicking his grandfather’s techniques, he explains how the images were produced. Evocatively, he searches for old photos and tools within crumbling, sepia-tinted boxes. Inside his dimly lit and dust-filled studio, he moves slowly but comfortably, as if he were an expert witness of Bolivia’s urban development and the construction of a liberal national identity.

To showcase this era, the film foregrounds the aforementioned theme of

‘Belonging’. Here, Zamorano deploys high-quality and digitized early twentieth-century photos referencing La Paz’s iconic and grandiose buildings, its growing railroad system, and the city’s élite. In turn, political developments are analysed in the ‘Overflow’ section, while ‘Framing’ focuses on delinquents and prostitutes who lived on the fringes of the city’s urban and legal frameworks.

Rather than overcrowding the film with textual explanation to accompany the images, Zamorano invites the audience to speculate about whose images are being portrayed and why they were selected. Also left open for audience interpretation are the questions of how the studio became a site of memory and a repository of Bolivia’s history of urbanization, and how will the collective memory of this period be weaved into the country’s official, national history now that La Paz’s city government is the custodian of the archive.

The minimal referential information, incorporated mostly at the beginning of the film, does not aim to tell the full story of twentieth-century Bolivian history. Rather, Zamorano intention seeks to draw the viewers’ attention to the images themselves, while simultaneously prompting them to experience other sensorial elements, such as the sounds of indigenous musical instruments, the background noise of the buzzing city, different shades of light, and the juxtaposition of fragments of the past and present.

This montage transports the viewer through La Paz’s different temporalities, generating profound questions along the way about how archives become an infrastructural element of a national development, how collective memory is actualized in the materiality of the built

environment, and how places connect different experiences of time and belonging across generations.

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