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with Visual Media- U. Manchester

Nosso Morro (2016)

37minutes

Director: Benjamin Llorens Rocamora, Clara Kleininger, Daniel Lema, Paloma Yáñez Serrano, Stefania Villa and Spyros Gerousis

Produced by The Big Tree Collective

<http://www.bigtreecollective.com/nosso-morro.html>

Official Selection: Ethnographic Film Festival of Quebec

Conferences: Visual Participatory Methods (Paris), MMU PRG conference (Manchester), Göttingen conference.

Film Synopsis: In Rio de Janeiro, ten young people coming from socioeconomic environments as opposed as the wealthy neighbourhood of Gávea and the favela Rocinha, are to make a documentary of their own creation. The young participants decide to use the resources and knowledge facilitated by the Big Tree Collective to cinematically explore the socio-spatial segregation of the environment that they share on their daily lives. The film unveils the personal stories of the inhabitants of one and the other side of the mountain, while reflecting on the creation of a youth-based documentary narrative. An experimental film that brings to the screen a creative testimony that reveals the vacuum of stereotypes, offering new attitudes and perspectives that foresee a better future for both communities, and the city.

Nosso Morro, Teaching Film Through Practice

Gávea is the neighbourhood with highest development index of Rio de Janeiro, built on the lower hill of the Mountain Dois Irmaos (two brothers) and expanding towards the upper side of the mountain on the margins of Gávea Street. The American School – where the Nosso Morro workshop took place – is the last gated building of Gávea, just 200 meters before the top of the mountain. Fifty meters after the school, the favela Rocinha – the largest in Latin America – starts. It is an expansion of formal and informal houses that began with small farms on the 30s and today houses 70 thousand people. After reaching the top, Gávea Street descends through Rocinha in the opposite face of the mountain, being the only street in Rio de Janeiro that crosses a favela instead of surrounding it. One of the singularities of this street is that other than Gávea's shopping mall, there is no space for young and adults from both neighbourhoods to interact. As Valentina, a student in the American School says in the documentary, "we are closed to each other, we go down the school in cars and we allow no place for interaction".

Nosso Morro started as a mode of retrospective ethnography. Having grown up in Rio de Janeiro and studied in the American School as a teenager, I knew there was a part of the story of Gávea and Rocinha that remained hidden. It was the story of young people from both neighbourhoods who, within their different positions of wealth, negotiated their everyday existence with the structures of urban segregation. In the search of such a story, six ethnographic filmmakers of the Big Tree Collective – Benjamin Llorens Rocamora, Clara Kleininger, Daniel Lema, Stefania Villa,

Spyros Gerousis and myself – got engaged in a participatory film workshop to teach ethnographic documentary to ten young participants of Gávea and Rocinha. The workshop proposal came as a means to create a place for interaction for young people of Gávea and Rocinha, so rather than assert their segregation in individual interviews, they would work collaboratively to unpack their differences through the making of their own film. In the following paragraphs, I will explore how this teaching experiment developed through the two months of learning and filming, to then focus on the reflective editing choice of *Nosso Morro*.

After months of preparation, the Big Tree Collective selected 10 participants aged 15-21 on the basis of their interest in filmmaking. Half of them were upper class students of the American School, the other half were students and part-time workers of Rocinha. The workshop was set in the American School, as the parents of the school's participants weren't comfortable having their children going up to Rocinha. In addition, it was an opportunity to open the doors of the school to a group of young people in Rocinha, so they could discover the student community behind the gated walls. The school is highly secured due to the armed violence in Rocinha and growing notions of fear of what might happen if a lost bullet reaches the school and hurts one of the students. Consequently, the workshop was not only bringing two distinct groups of young people together, but also offering a scenario for notions of 'fear' to be challenged. The first day of the workshop was aimed at working out the themes the participants wanted to explore in the film. After introducing each other and breaking the ice, we began an interactive dynamic of project development. We laid down a big paper on the floor to make a visual map of the topics they wanted to discuss in both their communities. They talked about structural problems like marginality, violence and the schooling situation for the people of Rocinha, who have to travel to other neighbourhoods to their schools, as there is no public high school in the favela. They mentioned nature, and their common lack of connection with the Atlantic forest that surrounds the school and the favela, arguing the impenetrability of the jungle and the lack of pathways made both groups highly urbanite. They were also concerned with infrastructure and the situation of water canalisation and trash collection in Rocinha making the conversation turn towards the favela, with the participants of the American School asking questions and the participants of Rocinha giving an informed picture of the situation. At that point, they started to think about Gávea Street as a location that could allow them to talk about Rocinha, but also about Gávea, bringing together their different interpretations of the street. They discussed the possibility of comparing the everyday challenges people experience in both neighbourhoods, however they recognized the reason they had been accustomed to 'fear' was the constant repetition of 'difference' and concluded they wanted to take a more positive approach to the topic. The final statement they wrote down as their research objective was: 'Dreams and opportunities of the inhabitants of Gávea Street'.

Working towards a storyboard, the participants put together a list of people they knew could be interesting to film. Erikles, one of the Rocinha participants, mentioned 'Amendoim', a community leader who runs the oldest walking-tours company in Rocinha, called Favela Tours. Juanita and Hanna, two participants students of the American School, were more concerned about activities where Rocinha-Gávea interactions were present. They proposed to film the football match between the girls of the American School and the girls of Rocinha, which take place periodically in the school's grass field. The other proposal was to film the Ballet class of Dalal Askar, a famous ballet school in lower Gávea that gives scholarships to students from the favela. The storyboard was built around these ideas, trying to shape connections between the spaces of interaction and individual testimonies, including those of students and workers of the American School, as well as,

inhabitants and small business owners in Rocinha. The story board although did a poor job in bridging the scenes, was very useful to put their wider research idea into a concrete step-by-step process. Probably that was the moment of highest participation, as the participants made sense of the project they were going to carry out collectively. However, the group's enthusiasm diminished as the shooting outcome did not reveal as expected, especially the football and ballet. They saw that while there was some interaction between Rocinha and Gávea youngsters, it was quite limited and not very intimate, having affectionate words towards each other, but without considering the possibility of being friends. The individual interviews were more successful, as they were carried out with older people who were more confident on camera and had the possibility to look at their dreams, opportunities and desires for the future in retrospect, providing rich ethnographic content.

On the technical side there were specific moments of collective entanglement with the medium. During the shooting of football match we used three cameras and one drone to film the 60 min game. The material was abundant and although not all of it was usable for the edit, they had the opportunity to experiment and make their own judgements. A great example of experimentation takes place in the scene the girls of Rocinha go down the hill to play the match at the American School. Two participants controlled the cameras making their individual decisions, while the facilitators and other team members accompanied them, advising the cameraperson about the film movements. The scene reaches a point, as the girls disappear at the end of some stairs, when Erikles (holding the camera) asks: 'should I zoom' and upon a lack of response from Stefania (facilitating), he decides to pan up to the view of Rocinha, making it one of the most aesthetically meaningful shots of the film. The spontaneity of filmmaking reveals itself when the learning filmmaker is finally able to negotiate himself with the camera, producing anticipated decisions with concrete aesthetic outputs while action takes place. This is the pivotal point of ethnographic film, as the filmmaker surpasses the idea of producing objectivising images of the outside world and starts playing with technique and dynamic movement to rethink social aesthetics. The final comment of Erikles on the film sums up this particular attention to subjective uses of technique and detail, illustrating our main teaching goal:

'For me everything was simpler, a photo was a photo. But when I started this course, I learned what you said, the smaller details are sometimes a beautiful way to explain broader things. Especially facial expression when he (Amendoim) was speaking about his work and family. He was moved by his own story, and I found that fascinating. If I was just passing by normally in the street I would not notice these things, but as I was filming and I had chosen the person, I found it very beautiful'.

Practice reveals itself as the route to understand the nature and complexity of the moving image, an idea we considered central to this project and which became the dominant narrative thread of the documentary wilts in the edit. Running through the rushes we came to understand that the different scenes could only be efficiently connected with the rational given in the workshop in each occasion. The conversations that had led the participants to make practical film choices were actually key to give meaning to the story, making the viewer understand the research intention and the different film outcomes produced. This combination provided a reflective character to the film, portraying the learning process and outcome as an open contestation to commercial film productions that are shoot 'without showing the real face of Rocinha' (Interview with American

school worker, Diogo). Not only we wanted to portray how young people saw Gávea and Rocinha, but also how they had formulated their thoughts to create comprehensible images of particular events. This technique is not very common and can be disruptive to the narrative flow, however in this occasion it did the absolute opposite, it created a logical map from a particular group of youngsters to understand given interviews and observational scenes across Gávea Street. In this sense the film also illustrates the making of the workshop and the experiential learning dynamics the Big Tree Collective brought forward in collaboration with Nosso Morro's participants. Therefore, by using the workshop as the narrative thread we were able, not only to tailor a story and make it progress -by coming back to the common place in between the different scenes-, but also we were capable of adding a new dimension of meaning to the film: that of the self-reflexion on the creation of the own film. In other words, the visibility of the stitches -that reveal the participatory/collaborative methods employed- were far more than functioning as mere cutaways, providing a new reference framework upon which the lived experience and the filmic experience could meet.

Paloma Yáñez Serrano
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