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with Visual Media- U. Manchester

City Play (2015)
32 minutes
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Student film of Mphil of Ethnographic Documentary of the Granada Center of visual anthropology, University of Manchester

Produced by Big Tree Collective
http://www.bigtreecollective.com/city-play.html

Official Selection: Ethnofest, Astra Film Festival, Ethnographic film festival of Quebec, Ethnographic film festival of Belgrade, Qabila Film Festival, Family Film Project

Film Synopsis: Play, although very present culturally in Cairo, is seen as a form of entertainment rather than an endogenous human characteristic. As such any debate of play is excluded from educational policies and consequently from the schooling system. This came to my attention in 2012 when I contributed to the creation of the first play-based educational scenario in Cairo. This project was inspired by the mini city educational model, present in over 70 countries of the world, and took the name of Mini-Medina ('mini-city' in Arabic). The project aims to create a simulated real-size city scenario for children to learn about the mechanisms of a city, imagining their ideal city and their role in society. During childhood every child goes through a process of discovery in which they make sense of themselves and the world around using their experience and imagination. This film its a journey shown in two screens contrasting the different roles children can take in the city and later how those roles transform as they grow up. Exploring the different interpretations and desires towards everyday life that children have in the city, revealing how in play the child learns to adapt to culture while acquiring tools to recreate and reinvent society. The film, shot in Cairo, seeks to portray the different ways children have of playing the city and play in the city, experimenting with the thin line that distinguishes play from reality.

City Play, Pretend filmmaking and children's play in post-revolutionary Cairo

'Play' in relation to the 'city' refers to situations where the player steps into a sphere of activity with a disposition of its own, while still rooted and located in ordinary life. The prerequisite for these moments to take place is freedom; play can be proposed but it cannot be imposed (Huizinga, 1938:8). The disposition can manifest itself as a game-like activity, or as a daily action in which body and language are used in a playful manner. The documentary City Play was shot in 2015 in post-revolutionary Cairo and explores the characteristics of 'play in the city' and 'playing the city', examining the city as a complex structure of social dynamics in which play takes place,

and the city as a game-like activity. To make such comparison the research worked with two distinct groups of children for three months. First with a group of seven children from different neighbourhoods in Cairo with whom I conducted individual camera training sessions so they could produce their own individual records of play. And later with a group of children participating in Mini-Medina, an alternative education project in which groups of 60 children are brought together to make their ideal city. Guided by facilitators, the children first develop a constitution, then build the city with recycled materials and then take roles in the city and start interacting with each other. In this project, I introduced the camera as part of the game-activity of children pretending to be reporters, allowing them to document the play-city experience from within the play. The combination of these distinct play related processes within the documentary City Play aimed on one side to observe the city as the producer of play, with a direct correlation between the social interactions in the city and the object of play; and on the other side, to analyse pretence play as the means to formulate the city, locating play as a component in the materialisation of the city. In the following paragraphs I will explain the ethnographic importance and challenges of exploring play collaboratively with children, the specificities of filming with each group in Cairo, and the choice and possibilities of montage to help wider audiences understand the complexity of children's play.

Playful behaviour is central in all human cultures, both in language and physical action. Play anthropologist Huizinga argued, "Civilization does not come from play, it arises in and as play, and never leaves it" (Huizinga, 1938:173). In light of a centralised bureaucracy, high unemployment, and a wide range of social taboos and prohibitions, through which the colonial legacy and current military rule uses discipline and obedience to penetrate body and mind (Mitchell, 1988:176); the inhabitants of Cairo use play as a means to distract themselves, or even contest, everyday life oppression. What makes Cairo's culture different from other societies is the strict line that separates play and non-play time, the first associated with chaos and the second with work. However, practice shows play is subversive and adaptable to all scenarios as a tool to break with predefined modes of behaviour constituting the status quo. A mosque can be both a space for play and non-play, a space of play while girls play with water in the mosque's hammam as they escape from the midday sun, but also, a non-play space during the hours of prayers. Through play, children are actively trying to make sense of the world, first through mimesis, and second through critical-thought, developing opinions of their own as they analyse the different perspectives to certain subjects. As an adult, I cannot experience what the child experiences, neither imagine it (Schachtel, 1947:301). To understand the child, the child should be allowed to have a voice of its own. Studies focusing on what children think include, Blubond-Langer, exploring children's views on illness and death (1978); Sharp, on memory (2002) and Scheper-Hughes, on children's agency in relation to the social context (1998). These studies show there has been a conceptual shift towards children as social agents, which requires anthropology to rethink the toolkit of methods thinking of children as agentive subjects (Mitchell, 2006:60).

MacDougall and Filibert have used visual ethnography to reveal the children's world and imagination from the children's perspective. Following the principle that the image is a reflexive object of the moment being lived by the filmmaker (MacDougall 2006:3), if the image is to be reflective of children, the children should be active participants of image production. The visual analysis of children's play becomes then reflective of play performed in front of the camera, but also of the children filming, whose own world perception is revealed through the frames they produce through the camera lens. In addition, participative filming minimizes the power imbalance that characterizes top-down approaches to research, when the child is being directly questioned by the researcher (Mitchell, 2006:60). The participatory aspect reverts the 'communicative advantage' of the adult researcher (Clark 1999:40), giving a voice to children, and exploring how children's knowledge can serve to educate adults (Theis 2001; Rich 1999). Through the research, the more I began reflecting on my own play, the more I allowed myself to engage with other people's play. I tried to limit my personal will in the interaction with the children, to allow them to include me into their personal plans, which in this occasion were naturally particular due to the presence of the camera.

In the case of Ibtesam, a nine years old girl with whom I filmed in her neighbourhood, Ard el Lewa. As I helped her adjust the camera parameters, I would repeat out laud what I was doing so she could follow, to which she would always say: "you touch here and then there and it becomes bright, I know Paloma, I know". Then she would take the camera from my hands and go show it to the other kids. The position of teacher would allow Ibtesam to view herself from the view point of the other (Mead, 1934), of the teacher by imitating my role, and of the children she was teaching, whose behaviour was similar to her own behaviour when being taught by me (Piaget, 1962: 123). Peer-to-peer learning can be especially beneficial in dealing with physical objects, as the comprehension of the manipulation mechanism can help integrate other children into the activity, transforming it into a collective game. Socially the object finds its meaning and importance. For example, Ibtesam would only like to film the days in which her friends were out in the street, if not she would repeat, "There is nothing to do". When other kids were present (although there was nothing special happening), the fact that a crowd was around would transform her attitude and she would find different things to film in the street. In this process, as the character of the child holding the camera changes, so does the image representation, where the filmmaker's intention or action-scheme, as Garvey and Bernard define it (1977), determine the relation to the camera as and object and the image production.

Working with the second group of children in Mini-Medina, the camera was introduced as a tool to document what was happening on the children city. While this process took place within a game context, it was a serious task that needed to be done. The children started collectively taking tasks, Mohamed (12) rushing and talking to Marwa (14): "I go with one camera to film the houses and you go with Paloma to film the theatre". The important thing was to keep filming, the camera as an object was guiding our actions with no apparent script. This is what Bateson referred to as metacommunication (1972), the coordinated arrangements among players defining

play, as opposed to non-play. As a facilitator, I was filming and trying to understand the game as children developed different conflicts, as well as supervising the second camera. Both my images and the children are product of a game experience and our work as filmmakers. To say I was working and they were playing is unjust to the experience. Object play with the camera can serve to question the distribution of social roles as well as hierarchy of expertise associated with age (Lillard 2013:160). The fictive time developed for the simulated city directly confronts the child with their perception of adult culture in regards to city structure and life. Their reinterpretation of the city allows the observers to identify the self-regulated and semi-autonomous world of the child, which preoccupied Hardman's research, regarding children "as people to be studied under their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching" (Hardman 1973:87). This concept was named by Margaret Mead (1978) as the 'configurative culture' whereby the child processes adult culture and redefines it to its current needs, in retrospect to the social changes that have led the child to desire a different culture than the one their parents uphold (Wulff 1995:9). The film montage aims to unite childhood discourses of work, play, and dreams. The comparison of working children with children playing to work aims to contest simplistic generalizations providing examples of cases where both children and adults negotiate play and work in their daily lives.

The collection of the material shot represents a fragmented partial truth of the reality of the children filmed. This partial reality is both subject to real and game world time; therefore, it should be understood as a subjective reality product of a play experience between the children, the camera, and the adults involved. Some parts of the film are deliberately staged while others are simply part of an unrecognised performance. The montage choice aimed to emphasize the ongoing creations and recreations of the world that children were experiencing, both while acknowledging themselves at play, but also when unconsciously playing, such as the instances when they staged out their future, which to them was a serious non-play act. The split screen montage is justified within the heuristic concept, pushing the viewer to realize the fragmented nature of the experience of social reality (Suhr and Willerslev 2013:11). The purposeful suspension of time and space, as situations are juxtaposed with settings that do not pertain to the situation's reality, aim to lead the viewer to reflect on the nature of time and space that evoke the particular situation. This can be viewed as the invisible of the film, questioning the real/unreal, serious/play, order/chaos dichotomies that are very present in both the Egyptian and Western adult mindsets, but were quite fluid in the experiences of the children.

The montage is a means to re-assemble the world, bridging recurrent social themes the participant children used in the different situations of play. Shaped by the different feelings the children wanted to represent, which transcend verbal articulations of experience (Ewing, 1990:268). The split screen gave the opportunity to transport the audience to a singular partially-real space that communicates with them personally, so that regardless of the viewer's proximity to Cairo, they identify themselves with the disposition to play. This approach to ethnographic film drives away from the 'plain' style observational cinema, using non-traditional montage tools

to get the viewer's full attention, providing subjective visions on play, containing implicit selection assumptions for the viewer to assess. The film is structured around the different topics of the children's play narratives. Some recurrent themes were: politics, womanhood (marriage and pregnancy), city planning, security forces (police), and the mechanisms of exchange and the monetary system. The montage offered a possibility of contrasting how different children approach the same themes, and how each of them negotiates their position through the game experience, providing a reflection of reality that lies beyond what it is visible (Suhr, 2012:283). Reality is an experience of fragmentation, and the footage, a fragment of the children's perception (Dalsgaard, 2013:105). The double screen is reminder to the viewer of the fragmentation of experience but also of vision, providing an interaction with the viewer that transcends the image, playing with attention and focal points.

To conclude, it is important to note that the process of montage used in the final film was mainly dependent on my own opinions and interpretations as I reviewed and analysed the seventy hours of footage and the field notes. I tried to portray the footage as close to the expression and representation of how the children visualised the outcome. The creative editing process behind the film was my own dialogue with the images, and as such, it reflects my personal disposition and perception of play. What provides an added value is the intention, or the motivation to build the creative outcome in coherence with what children had hoped to communicate.

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