



## Ludic maps and capitalist spectacle in Rio de Janeiro



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### ABSTRACT

Rio de Janeiro is undergoing a makeover that is undeniably spectacular. Redevelopment schemes are dramatically rearranging the urban landscape, and crucially, this economic growth hinges on the production and circulation of images of the city. This paper explores a site of alterity and resistance where a favela youth collective has re-created Rio from its margins. This miniature world, known as Morrinho and built of bricks, mortar, and re-used materials, hosts a role-playing game featuring thousands of inch-tall avatars. This paper argues that re-visioning the world anew through play makes the society of the spectacle inhabitable and thus contestable. How does the society of the spectacle become a terrain for struggle in Rio? Locating spectacle production in nation-state formation and the urban process, the paper provides a genealogy of the spectacle beyond the modern North Atlantic metropole. Locating the favela within a Brazilian geographical imagination frames ethnographic data collected as an observer and participant in the Morrinho game. While the spectacle may hinge on the relationship between visuality and power, this essay observes how signs take on material lives through ludic re-appropriation. Play becomes a form of commentary, an alternative mode of knowledge about the city, and functions dually as both description of and participant in the social world in which it is embedded.

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### Introduction

Under a thick canopy of jackfruit and mango trees in the forested edge of a small favela<sup>1</sup> in Rio de Janeiro lies a peculiar model of the city. Known as Morrinho, or “Little Hill,” the mock-up is largely built with tens of thousands of terra-cotta hollow tile bricks—the kind used to construct (life-size) housing in the favela—each cut by mason trowel and hand-painted vibrant colors to resemble houses with tiny windows (see Fig. 1). The site, sprawling over 400 square meters of shaded hillside, hosts an ongoing role-playing game played by the model’s young stewards, a group of some fifteen to twenty male youths, who manipulate and

ventriloquize Morrinho’s thousands of inch-tall inhabitants. These *bonecos*<sup>2</sup>, made of colorful plastic Lego bricks with totemic markings are given individual identities and acquire life histories over months and years of play (see Fig. 2). The bonecos represent myriad social identities, including men and women, children and adults, residents, shopkeepers, drug gang members, DJs, police officers, politicians, prostitutes, and television crews. They enact dramas of romance, commerce, leisure, violence, and quotidian life using these avatars. Morrinho is not only an objectification of its creators’ affective lives—a spatialized expression of their desires, anxieties, and aspirations—but also a continual re-engagement with their urban reality.

The rules of the game follow the rules of urban life, as the players judge it. Morrinho bears a direct if ambiguous relationship to the social reality surrounding it: shortly after the site’s inception in 1997, Rio’s elite military police battalion invaded and occupied the youths’ home community, and still use it as a training ground for tactical operations. The municipal government also implemented a patchwork of engineering projects and social programs aimed at incorporating the favela into formal real-estate

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<sup>1</sup> Favela has been translated into English variously as “slum,” “shantytown,” “informal settlement,” and “squatter settlement.” In Rio, favela residents often use the less pejorative alternatives *comunidade* (community) or *morro* (hill). The 1950 General Census first defined favelas as opposed to the formal city by a set of criteria regarding size, construction type, legal status of land tenure, and absence of public infrastructures and official signage system. Briefly, scholars have analyzed the historiographic construction of the favela as a social and political category (Valladares, 2005; Zaluar and Alvito, 1998; Perlman, 2010), as a territory of legal and juridical exception (Santos et al., 2012; Gonçalves, 2013; Magalhães, 2014), and as space of drug-gang power exercised through violence (Leeds, 1996; Arias, 2006; Silva, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> In Portuguese, *boneca* denotes “doll” and is also used colloquially to refer to sexually attractive women. Kulick (2009:143) also notes *boneca* being used as a code word for transvestite prostitutes in classified advertisements. In Morrinho, the masculinized *boneco* refers generally to these fashioned plastic game figurines and might correspond best to the English term “action figure.” The normative gendering of play in Morrinho is further discussed below.



Fig. 1. Morrinho model *in situ* in 2010. Photo by author.

markets. Amid these changes in security and infrastructure at home, Morrinho became recognized as an art project and traveled in replica installations at cultural festivals worldwide that, by the first decade of the 21st century, had begun including “the favela” as a part of Brazil’s cultural repertoire. As Morrinho grew into a formally instituted tourist attraction, art installation, and cultural project, its youth founders, alongside curators, filmmakers, NGO volunteers, and other collaborators and supporters, began branding it “a small revolution” and deploying a language of architecture, dreams, and desire. Hundreds of thousands have either visited the model *in situ* or seen it in replica. As representational practice, Morrinho both accommodates and disrupts the assumptions and projections of a range of spectators and associates, including art curators, artists, filmmakers, journalists, academics, tour operators, and tourists.

The miniature city is both a reflection of urban reality as well as a para-site (Marcus, 2000) where the city is imagined in ways that trouble predominant discourses of Rio, a city that has come to manifest many of the dreams and nightmares of late capitalist urbanization: an expansion of credit-fueled consumption, waterfront “revitalization” developments, spiraling property values, mega-event infrastructure projects, and constant media coverage of the militarization of favela communities. Rio’s recent boom in profile if not in fortunes is undeniably spectacular in nature. By “spectacular” I mean to signal not simply its sudden and dramatic appearance but also how this economic growth hinges on the production and circulation of images of the city. But what are its spaces of alterity and resistance? How does the society of the spectacle become a terrain for struggle in Rio? How might we historicize the role of spectacle production in ordering the urban process? This paper

investigates geographies and histories mobilized in making the city visible, and thus an object of contested power, to its inhabitants.

I offer an ethnographic account of Morrinho as a ludic map of the city and prism through which to observe the politics and culture of spectacle in Rio. A ludic map, as I conceive it and as Morrinho exemplifies it, does not pretend to pass itself off as a direct representation of a fixed or prescribed external reality. Rather, play as a disposition to the world points to an indeterminacy of the social order in which it is embedded (Malaby, 2009). The argument presented here recognizes that the spectacle has long been conceived as an expression of visibility and the power of visual culture over political and economic life. However, drawing on work showing how visual signs are also material objects and have social lives of their own, I suggest that play, as a mode of representing and engaging with the world, becomes a basis for alternative ways of knowing the city. Morrinho turns out to be neither a field of utopianism nor a naïve reflection of the world, but rather a space for reflection on how the city is lived and represented—and the gap between the two. This descriptive analysis of Morrinho as a space of encounter opens up a discussion within which to rethink the relationship between play and utopianism, spectacle and politics.

In investigating these relations, the paper examines the use of spectacle in its entanglements with racialization, nation-state formation, militarization, urban development, and representations of the city in Brazil. Archival research, historical texts, and audiovisual materials construct a case that the legacies for critical spectacle studies may lie, geographically and historically, beyond the modernist North Atlantic metropole. I also draw on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork at Morrinho and in its surrounding community, during which I became an active playing member of the

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