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## Review of Walachai, dir. Rejane Zilles

Traci Roberts-Camps

University of the Pacific, trobertscamps@pacific.edu

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*Walachai*. Dir. Rejane Zilles. Brazil, 2009. Dur.: 75 min.

Rejane Zilles's documentary film *Walachai* begins with beautiful, sweeping images of Southern Brazil. As we learn during the course of the film, Walachai is among a number of small settlements in Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, that are made up of inhabitants of German descent. Others include Jamerthal, Batatenthal, and Frankenthal. One of the main themes of this documentary is the fact that the people of Walachai speak a special dialect derived from German. In fact, most of the children in this community only learn Portuguese when they start school. Thus the meaning of the word 'Walachai'—"terra distante de todo"—is true in the sense of distance from their ancestors in Germany and also linguistic and some cultural distance from Brazil. However, as many of those interviewed in the film attest, they consider themselves Brazilian, "Eu sou brasileiro." In this documentary, Rejane Zilles returns to her hometown from which she left at nine years of age and interviews members of this small, tight-knit community. Some of the interviews are in Portuguese and others are in the German dialect and subtitled. Zilles includes the names of those interviewed on screen—Bertha Straussberger, Gerson Closs, Benno Wendling, Arsênio Schaab, Liane Klein, Natália Wendling, and Helga Kieling, to name a few.

The first woman that Zilles interviews is Bertha Straussberger, who is ninety-one years old and rings the tower bells every morning and has been weeding in the cemetery for fifty-seven years. This theme of consistency is present throughout the documentary as Zilles speaks with members of this small farming community. Another theme is life without the comfort of many modern technologies. For example, one farmer says he would not be able to accomplish anything on his farm with a car; he needs his wagon. Zilles shows the farmer and two others making the wheels for the wagon themselves. Later in the film, the director speaks with a blacksmith, who names his instruments in Portuguese and German, and proudly admits that he is also a "horoscopoteiro" [one who can read horoscopes]. Within this question of naming things in Portuguese and German belies an important thread in this documentary; namely, the significance of the language that those interviewed speak and to what degree this determines their identity. Many of the interviewees express a variation of the statement "I speak German but I'm Brazilian." The emphasis for many is on the fact that they are Brazilian, despite the fact that most of the children in the community do not learn Portuguese until they go to school and most families speak German at home. One person tells of how difficult it was for the community during World War II because they were not allowed to speak German in public. In fact, one person recounts that a teacher could be arrested for using German to explain something in school and one man was arrested for drinking and subsequently singing a song in German in public.

Zilles devotes a segment of *Walachai* to Professor Benno Wendling who was a teacher and also created a record book of the history of the community. In the interview with Wendling, the camera focuses in on the stories and pictures collected in this book, which tell of the ways in which the community members arrived in Walachai, with whom they married, where they traveled, and many other personal stories. Many of those interviewed—young to old—affirm they will never leave "a roça" and one explains "a roça nos sustenta." Others leave the farms to work in a factory, one saying she never learned anything in the country. The camera shows mostly women in the factory sewing, crocheting, and making parts for shoes. A painter interviewed in the documentary describes how he moved away but felt that the "roça" was always in him and that it came out in his paintings. He also expresses the feeling of isolation he felt when he realized that his community only spoke a dialect of a language that only a few could understand. As he put it, they could not communicate with other Brazilians or with Germans and only a few people in the world spoke their dialect. While he knew he wanted to leave and interact with the rest of the world, he still recognized the importance of his origins. The director-narrator herself explains toward the end of the documentary that her family left when she was nine; that Walachai was the only thing she knew at the time and had not been ready to leave yet. Thus, in a sense, this documentary is the recovery of a past lost

when her path took her away from Walachai to Rio, where she grew up.

As part of a recovery of rural Latin America, this documentary is comparable to films such as Chilean director María Teresa Larrain's documentary *El juicio de Pascual Pichun* (2007). However, Rejane Zilles's documentary is devoid of the political message of Larrain's film. Another possible comparison is to films such as Argentine director Carlos Sorin's fictional film *La ventana* (2008), which is set in the Patagonia of Argentina and includes similar sweeping images of the countryside or Mexican director Francisco Vargas's *El violín* (2005), which is comparable in its socio-political commitment to Larrain's film but similar in nature to *Walachai*'s attention to the beauty of the countryside.

Perhaps the most memorable line in Zilles's documentary is from Professor Wendling. The camera shows him sitting on a bench in what appears to be a rural bus stop, looking out over the fields of various crops and explaining that he does this frequently and will stay there for hours at a time. At one point, he says "A vida vai indo. Cada minuto que passa, passou." In *Walachai*, we perceive this sense of time as stationary but also passing; emblematic of rural communities around Brazil, Latin America, and the rest of the world, that are both static and inevitably changing.

Traci Roberts-Camps, University of the Pacific