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## Film Review: 'Los Reyes'

The "kings" of Santiago's oldest skate park are a pair of black street dogs, Football and Chola, who'll capture your heart in this creative look at an urban space.

By [Peter Debruge](#) ▾



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In late 1965, Gay Talese set out to profile Frank Sinatra for Esquire magazine. Sinatra refused to be interviewed but allowed the writer to hang around, observing, which he did for three months, racking up almost \$5,000 in expenses. In the end,

Talese penned what became one of the most memorable celebrity profiles ever written, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” proving in the process that sometimes the indirect approach can be more effective than the ostensibly candid, all-access interview.

A charmingly roundabout documentary born of curiosity, patience, and no small amount of inventiveness on the part of its authors, “Los Reyes” reminds me of that story. There’s no glamorous A-lister at its center. In fact, there are hardly any human characters to speak of. This unconventional nonfiction portrait takes place at the oldest skate park in Santiago, Chile, and was intended to feature the teenagers who congregate there regularly. But over the course of roughly two years hanging around Los Reyes with cameras, co-directors Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff discovered that while the skaters came and went — many of them prohibitively shy about being filmed — there were two characters that always seemed to be hanging about. Two dogs. And so they shifted the entire focus of the film such that the inseparable canines became its protagonists.

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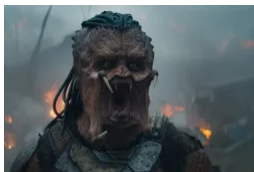
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Suddenly, under the pretense of making a movie about Football and Chola (who are not named until the end credits), the directors found that the adolescent skaters didn’t seem to mind being recorded. They even agreed to wear wireless mics, opening up about personal subjects — candid stories about smoking and selling weed, heated disagreements with their guardians, and run-ins with the corrupt

local police — while the cameras were trained elsewhere, on the two street dogs, the true “kings” of Los Reyes skate park.

Football is the older of the two. With a chin frosted white with age and tufts of red in his mane, the friendly black mutt looks like some kind of shepherd mix, almost always chewing on something — plastic bottles, rocks, an abandoned tennis ball — as he surveys the park through bright, bloodshot eyes. A black Lab crossed with who-knows-what, Chola likes to play, chasing after anyone who cycles through her turf, while reserving a special respect for the skaters, whom she treats like old friends. Chola has invented a game where she picks up balls from the nearby sports fields and balances them at the edge of the skate bowl, eventually nudging them over the brink with her nose.

You don't have to be a “dog person” to find these two irresistible, although those with a soft spot for animals may be surprised by how deeply attached they get over the course of the film. One can only imagine what kind of footage Perut and Osnovikoff captured in the year or so it took them to decide that the dogs would become the film's focus. Once that shift occurred, however, they clearly committed to it. “Los Reyes” isn't a write-around, like Talese's story, but a massive strategy shift that called for an entirely new approach to editing, a task the directors took upon themselves.

To pull it off required an incredibly sophisticated sound design, basically a second parallel cut of the film on which mixing pro Roberto Espinoza helped them layer audio from the dogs' daily lives with conversations “overheard” from the visiting teens. The first time the skaters appear, they are seen only abstractly (the directors film their shadows against the pavement, or close-ups of their fingers rolling a joint), while the constructed soundtrack — likely pulling audio from another time — provides chatter about a recurring subject: the clash between their dreams and the expectations their parents have set for them. These are not poor kids, although a misleading early exchange might lead one to assume otherwise, as one kid talks about leaving home after his grandmother called him “a dog.”

It would be a mistake to view Football and Chola as metaphors. They're more like mascots, playful observers to the human drama around them and a comforting constant, no matter what the weather, in what sounds like the turbulent lives of those who come to Los Reyes to skate. While the directors are careful not to artificially anthropomorphize the pair, their attention to these two street dogs' situation feels like a natural extension of the compassionate impulse found in the most humanistic documentaries: "Los Reyes" cares about these two creatures, and so too will audiences by the end of the film.

Presumably, Football and Chola's behavior was predictable enough that the filmmakers could assemble scenes from footage shot over multiple hours or days, cutting between angles to give the impression that they had cameras everywhere, as in several sequences when the dogs run around the edge of the bowl barking at the skaters. Cinematographer Pablo Valdés has a gift for creative framing that contributes to the overall "art film" feel of the project, as we study the park and its routines from high above, or reflected in pools of water. Hi-def macro video brings us within petting distance of the dogs to take in the texture of their paws, the lolling pink of their tongues, and the rhythm of their breathing. At one point, it even zooms in to study the insects who live alongside them.

So much of "Los Reyes" amounts to ruminative down time, as the filmmakers simply observe the animals, inviting audiences to let their minds wander as they see fit. There are profound conclusions to be drawn, but none imposed. Like an afternoon spent skating or sunbathing at the park, the film is an escape from outside stresses, a breath of freedom in a busy world.

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