

In the summer of 1971, while on vacation from film school at UCLA, Luis Ospina met with his childhood friend Carlos Mayolo, and together they decided to film the sixth Pan American Games taking place in their hometown of Cali, Colombia. The idea came after an earlier attempt to record Pope Paul VI's visit to Colombia that didn't happen due to a lack of economic resources. Equipped with a 16mm camera, which Mayolo had 'borrowed' (without permission) from the advertising agency in Bogotá where he worked, the two aspiring film-makers travelled to Cali, where they arrived just in time to miss the opening ceremonies and all of their pomp and political rhetoric,¹ only to find that they would be excluded from all official venues without the proper permits, and that their arrival had been preceded by a film crew contracted by the Colombian state. Significantly, this official film crew was headed by Diego León Giraldo, a filmmaker iconic in Colombian film history as an early proponent of Cuban revolutionary cinema, and whose 1967 documentary *Camilo Torres* represented the first instance of militant cinema in Colombia.² León Giraldo, however, had come to exemplify the ideological ambiguities and betrayals of a nascent national film industry struggling to define itself amidst the contradictory impulses of political commitment and aesthetic value, economic viability and mass visibility.

Initiated as a spontaneous exercise in simply going out to film without imposing any specific narrative, the experiment inevitably would produce a portrait of the thousands of others who had also been excluded: the majority of Cali's population, for whom admission fees were far beyond reach, and who experienced the events and festivities alongside Ospina and Mayolo from behind chain-linked fences or in stairwells of shopping centres, where precarious transmissions were visible on televisions for sale in store windows. The first part of the film consists of a series of images juxtaposed in a disorderly or impressionistic manner, much in the way one might, in real life, experience the contrasts they embody. What makes them stand out is their sense of humour, absent from the exaggerated images of opulence and poverty that became formulaic in certain examples of Third World cinema. For example, one scene shows North American baseball players clad in bright new uniforms awkwardly towering above local spectators, probably more accustomed to playing baseball with improvised materials in empty lots – like one shown earlier in the same film, of adolescents in a marginal neighbourhood engaging in a sport that simultaneously embodied US imperialism and Cuban liberation, next to a billboard that read 'Vote for the Communist Party'. Another scene captures a group of off-duty soldiers clumsily dancing salsa in their heavy boots (an image that is not so extraordinary in a tropical militarised culture), while later in the film a young man wearing just his underwear effortlessly moves to Bobby Cruz and Richie Ray's 'Amparo Arrebató' (1968)³ on the banks of the Pance River, a popular weekend recreation spot that serves as a public pool for the city's working and middle classes.

- 1 This rhetoric was represented throughout the film by the sporadic and strategically placed voice-over of Conservative President Misael Pastrana, who had assumed office the previous year after a fraudulent election. The use of this voice-over, and the way it contradicts the image, is reminiscent of Glauber Rocha's juxtaposition of Governor's José Sarnay's political acceptance speech with images of his destitute constituents in *Maranhão 66* (1966), a film that Mayolo and Ospina had not yet seen at the time.
- 2 Although its significance is never disputed, Luis Ospina has identified this film as the first militant film in Colombia in his memoirs *Palabras al viento: Mis sobras completas*, Bogotá: Editora Aguilar, 2007, p.59. All Spanish citations are translated by the author unless otherwise noted.
- 3 This song was written in homage to a young dancer from Cali, whom the Nuyorican salsa duo met in 1968 while on tour in Colombia.

Oiga vea (*Listen Look*), as the film is called – partly in reference to the process of production in which, in the absence of a camera with a synchronised motor, Mayolo filmed the image while Ospina recorded the sound – is often described as consisting of two parts because of a break in the middle, when one film reel ends and another begins.⁴ The second part of the film is more sober in tone, as the location has moved from the centre of Cali to a shantytown, El Guabal, where local residents talk about the hypocritical nature of an event that projects false images of economic progress and development to the rest of the world. Such images function in denial of the real conditions that form the visual backdrop of this dialogue and which, one man hopes, will be represented by the film-makers so that ‘foreign delegations may see the real Colombia’.⁵ El Guabal was at the time constantly flooded by an open sewer known locally as the Canal de la Muerte, or the Canal of Death, where many children drowned because, unlike the athletes competing just a few kilometres away, they were never given the opportunity to properly learn to swim. One of the most interesting moments in the film occurs when a man shows the film-makers a series of photographs taken by his son with an old camera, documenting one of the worst recent floods through a series of what could easily be conventional portraits of friends and family, except that the subjects are up to their chests in flood water. This is the first indication in the film of a sense of complicity between Mayolo and Ospina and the people they are filming; in addition to (eloquently) speaking for themselves (a point repeatedly emphasised by the two in their refusal to resort to authoritative voice-overs), the subjects of this documentary have, before the arrival of the film crew, already examined their situation with a medium (photography) that represents a level of technological development inconsistent with their situation.⁶ A second instance of complicity is made evident (but only in hindsight) by the appearance of Luis Alfonso Londoño, a resident and one of the ‘founders’ of El Guabal,⁷ who became a crucial collaborator and friend of Mayolo and Ospina, until his premature death nine years later.⁸

The neighbourhood of El Guabal was chosen because it was the starting point of the Pan American Train Line, which was set up as a temporary form of public transportation connecting the poor neighbourhoods of Cali to the city centre so that residents of these areas could travel for free (in crowded, seat-less carriages) to the games – only to be excluded from them upon arrival.⁹ This meant that the journey itself became a popular pastime for hundreds of children, who rode the train back and forth all day long and as payment for this diversion had to suffer occasionally being beaten by the police with electric cables and poles. Ospina is shown recording testimony to this effect, solicited from both the children and the police – the latter predictably denying the accusations – although in the first part of this sequence a chaotic but festive image of laughing mobs of kids and mothers are seen running for the train and swarming happily around the young policeman and train operators, who seem flustered and somewhat confused by this bizarre scenario. If laughter is a form of resistance (‘ambivalent ... triumphant ... mocking, deriding’¹⁰), this may well be one of the most critical moments of the film, and even a defining moment in Mayolo and Ospina’s particular style of film-making – which relied on humour and not sarcasm, as some Colombian writers have claimed – to frame social critique within a body of work that was always more participatory than authoritative. Years later Mayolo described his process of making documentary films as one that was fundamentally collective, and maintained that his experience of recording footage

4 It is something like Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), although perhaps here the break is about the precariousness and not the drama of what the film contains, or is unable to contain.

5 All quoted film dialogue is translated from Spanish by the author unless otherwise noted.

6 Ronald Kay has written about the ‘temporal discontinuity’ represented by what he argues is the visual conquest that resulted from photography’s arrival to the Americas. See Ronald Kay, *Del espacio de acá: Señales para una mirada americana*, Santiago: Editores Asociados, 1980.

7 In Colombia shantytowns are called ‘barrios de invasión’ or literally ‘neighbourhoods of invasion’, ‘founded’ or established by a group of individuals or families who illegally appropriate and build houses on private or public lands. El Guabal was one such case.

8 Londoño died aged 53 from a condition that would have been treatable had he had the resources to seek proper medical attention. In his column ‘Sunset Boulevard’, which he published under the pseudonym Norma Desmond, Ospina wrote: ‘Fifteen days after (his death), (in)competent authorities arrived (to his house) with an eviction order but Londoño, just like in the movie, expelled the vampires of poverty from the premises.’ *El Pueblo* (Semanario Cultural), 19 November 1980, p.11.

9 Here I am paraphrasing Andrés Caicedo’s excellent reading of this film in *Ojo al cine*, no.1, 1974, pp.51–55.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Hélène Iswolsky), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, pp.11–12.

with Ospina in marginal neighbourhoods was subject (and accountable) to the reactions of their most immediate and relevant public: the curious spectators who inevitably gathered around to watch and comment on the film-makers' attempt to represent their situation. Mayolo likened this spontaneous participation to having '150 assistant directors' whose presence influenced the film's structure and content much more than its anticipated reception by the cinema club or film festival publics that would eventually pay to see it.¹¹ Although *Oiga vea* was filmed in the shadow of Diego León Giraldo's *Cali, ciudad de América* (*Cali, City of the Americas*, 1971) – a work that signalled León Giraldo's capitulation to commercial film-making – it quickly earned its place alongside *Camilo Torres* as an icon of militant cinema, which depicted poverty and exploitation in order to analyse the origins of social inequality and transform the structures that perpetuated it. However, a desire to produce critical consciousness through the transparency or visibility of marginality always carries the risk of producing the opposite effect: that of cynical indifference which comes from a saturation and fetishisation of this visibility in the absence of proper analysis or even a basic code of ethics. In Colombia,



Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, *Oiga vea*, 1971, 27 min, film stills. Courtesy of the artists

the most significant cultural historical aspect of Mayolo and Ospina's legacy may very well be the term they invented – '*pornomiseria*', or 'poverty porn' – to articulate a problem that became endemic to Colombian film-making in the 1970s, but that continues to haunt any discussion (historical or contemporary) about the representation of socio-economic hardship.

Just as *Oiga vea* consists of many false endings and narrative disruptions, the history of Colombian film is characterised by a series of frustrated beginnings. According to Hernando Salcedo Silva, film critic, historian and founder of the first film club in Colombia in 1949, 'The paradox is that for so many years Colombian film seems to be in its initial stages... It is only from 1960 on that we begin to see something like

11 Alberto Navarro, 'Entrevista con Carlos Mayolo', *Cinamateca*, no.5, August 1978, p.74.

professional film-making.¹² In the absence of film schools at home, many students had travelled abroad (primarily to Europe) to pursue their studies, and it was in this decade that they began returning to Colombia. The first arrivals, known collectively as ‘los maestros’, for the most part have been dismissed by film critics for producing primarily documentary, short films that according to Mayolo and Ramiro Arbeláez in their seminal 1974 text ‘Secuencia crítica del cine colombiano’ (‘Critical Sequence of Colombian Film’) were ‘touristic [and] commercial ... [with a] markedly stale, pseudo-European style ... the majority of them produced under the auspices of North American oil companies (ESSO). The reader may deduce the ideological undertone of these productions.’¹³ Most accounts concur that it was José María Arzuaga’s feature-length narrative film *Pasado el meridiano* (1967) which, despite its technical deficiencies (ultimately redeemable within Julio García Espinosa’s 1969 theory of an ‘imperfect cinema’¹⁴), was seen as the first step towards consolidating a properly national film movement capable of responding to both the specificities of the Colombian context and the broader political exigencies of that decade. A Spanish film-maker heavily influenced by Italian neo-



realism, Arzuaga spent most of his adult life toiling in advertising companies to fund the production of his work, and the protagonist of the film – an assistant at an advertising agency who confronts a series of obstacles in his journey to his hometown to bury his mother – is both autobiographical and representative of an emblematic marginal, anti-hero victim of an absurdly hostile environment. It was this honest and unadorned representation of a typically Colombian protagonist of working-class origins that hit a nerve among a film-club public who applauded the film’s virtues, as well as with the censorship board that would ultimately prohibit its circulation in commercial cinemas.

José María Arzuaga,
Pasado el meridiano,
1967, 100min, film still

12 Alberto Rodríguez Hernández, ‘Entrevista con Hernando Salcedo Silva’, *Ojo al cine*, no.3–4, 1976, pp.52–57.

13 Carlos Mayolo and Ramiro Arbeláez, ‘Secuencia crítica del cine colombiano’, *Ojo al cine*, no.1, 1974, pp.17–30.

14 See Julio García Espinosa, ‘Por un cine imperfecto’, *Aleph*, no.4, September 1972, pp.167–76.

Among the film's most enthusiastic supporters was Carlos Álvarez, a film critic who eventually began making documentary films in an attempt to implement and disseminate Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino's theory of a Third Cinema in Colombia. In their 1971 manifesto *Cine, cultura y descolonización* (*Cinema, Culture and Decolonisation*), Solanas and Getino proposed the model of Third Cinema as part of the larger project of cultural decolonisation, and as an alternative to First Cinema (Hollywood) and Second Cinema (Auteur Cinema).¹⁵ This was the decade of New Latin American Cinema, with progressive politicised film movements emerging most notably in Brazil and Cuba, but also in Argentina and Peru. Each scene had its own national traits and peculiarities, but all contributed in one way or another to a critique of US cultural hegemony and to 1960s revolutionary politics, which in a Latin American context had found its ultimate expression in the Cuban Revolution. Years later Mayolo recalled: 'It's too bad we weren't actually seeing these movies. [...] All of the theory came to us in books and magazines... Cinema was read, not seen.'¹⁶ In the last years of that decade, Álvarez attended several of the most important film festivals dedicated to the



Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva, *Chircales*, 1972, 42min, film still.
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emerging discourse in Latin America (and throughout the Third World) on militant film – namely *Viña del Mar* in 1967 and *Pésaro and Mérida* in 1968 – where films such as Santiago Álvarez's *Now* (1964), Fernando Birri's *Tire dié* (1960) and Solanas and Getino's *La hora de los hornos* (1968) premiered internationally. It was in Mérida where Colombia enjoyed its first significant showing with Álvarez's own *Asalto*, which along with *Camilo Torres* formed the basis for militant film in the country. However, the most memorable event was Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva's screening of a work in progress titled *Chircales* (1966–72), a rigorous anthropological investigation of a family

15 See Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino, *Cine, cultura y descolonización*, México D.F.: Siglo XXI Editores, 1978 (reprint).

16 C. Mayolo, *La vida de mi cine y mi televisión*, Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 2008, pp.49–50 and 61.

of brick-makers on the outskirts of Bogotá, that met all of Álvarez's requirements for politically engaged documentary film-making, and which would continue for many years after to serve as one of the best examples of how to make film in Colombia – an opinion shared by most critics irrespective of their political affiliations. According to Arbeláez and Mayolo, '*Chircales* is, within Colombian cinema, the most forceful condemnation of the conditions of underdevelopment and the socio-economic and ideological mechanisms of exploitation and dependence.'¹⁷

Like many film-makers of their generation, Rodríguez and Silva considered film to be an effective medium through which to pursue grassroots political activism in a country in which an oligarchic economic structure was still firmly in place. Before studying ethnology and film in Paris at the Musée de l'Homme, where she worked with Jean Rouch among others, Rodríguez had come into contact with families of brick-makers, or *chircaleros*, while participating in a social project organised by her friend and mentor Camilo Torres – a Catholic priest and founder of the Sociology Department at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, who eventually abandoned his academic career to join the rebel Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) and was killed shortly thereafter in combat. Along with Silva, her husband and long-time collaborator, Rodríguez began conducting interviews with the brick-maker families, and was confronted by a level of conflict and exploitation that, she later claimed, virtually negated all the theory she had brought back from Europe. Significantly, many hours of audio recordings were made before Rodríguez and Silva began to film, and the resulting footage reflects a remarkable level of intimacy and trust achieved through a year of cohabitation and five years of methodical research. The lengthy production was the result, to a great extent, of a lack of funding. The documentary was finally completed with money obtained from an award at the Cartagena International Film Festival in 1972 for *Planas* (1972), another documentary produced around the same time. Ultimately, however, these five years proved beneficial in that they provided ample opportunity for the pair to measure the results of a slow and careful investigation through a series of screenings in film clubs and union meetings, and among the families depicted in the documentary itself.

As with any marginal film in a country that lacked screening venues for anything other than the insipid, mainstream commercial movies imported primarily from the United States and Mexico, a significant part of a film-maker's job in Colombia was concerned with securing adequate distribution for one's work, particularly when this work formed part of a larger political project. During the late 1960s and early 70s film clubs began appearing all over the country – the most celebrated, perhaps, was the Cine Club de Cali, founded in 1969 by Andrés Caicedo. Caicedo was a prolific and precocious young writer and cinephile, and co-founder and director of *Ojo al cine*, a film journal that in two years (1974–76) and just five issues became seminal in the development of film criticism in Colombia and the recuperation of a recent film history already faced with imminent extinction. Although these film clubs were frequented by a public enthusiastic for independent film, Rodríguez and Silva expressed disillusionment with a certain level of elitism they encountered, as the discussions focused more on aesthetics than politics. Moreover, without effective state intervention towards the consolidation of a national film industry (like the ICAIC in Cuba, for example¹⁸) it was virtually impossible for independent film-makers to ever hope to recuperate the money they had invested in their films, much less imagine making a living from them. It was for this reason that film festivals – particularly those in Europe that, in the light of the Cuban Revolution and the success of films like Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, 1964), began to demonstrate an interest in Latin American cinema – became a viable option for showing work to a critical and receptive international audience, but sometimes more importantly as an economic means to continue working independently. It was not without some criticism that Rodríguez and Silva participated in festivals in Leipzig in 1972, Oberhausen in 1973 and Mexico in 1976, and eventually sold the rights to distribute *Chircales* to public television

17 Ramiro Arbeláez and C. Mayolo, '*Chircales*', *Ojo al cine*, no.1, 1974, p.50.

18 The Cuban Institute for Cinematographic Arts and Industry was founded in 1959, shortly after the Cuban Revolution, and produced films by seminal figures like Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (such as *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, or *Memories of Underdevelopment*, 1968) and Julio García Espinosa, but also produced works by film-makers from other parts of Latin America, most notably Patricio Guzmán's *The Battle of Chile* (1977–78).

networks in Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland and Germany, guaranteeing an international distribution that, Rodríguez reminded her detractors, worked on behalf of a 'proletariat internationalism'.¹⁹

Despite the fact that by the early 1970s Colombia represented one of the largest markets for film in Latin America (behind only Mexico and Brazil), it was the only country in Latin America that had failed to implement protectionist legislation to enable the development of a national film industry capable of competing with foreign distribution companies, which in 1975 were estimated to have made approximately six million US dollars in Colombia.²⁰ Under pressure from various professional sectors, in 1971 the Colombian state issued Decree 879, which enforced a law passed almost thirty years earlier recognising the potential for a national film industry and providing various stimuli for its development. The following year an additional resolution (315) was passed permitting an increase in the price of movie tickets (among the cheapest in the world) with a surcharge (*sobreprecio*) that would finance the production of Colombian shorts shot in 35mm colour and to be screened in every major commercial theatre prior to the feature film. Although a couple of years passed before the consequences of this legislative action were felt, the results were astounding. By 1974 the number of short films had reached 79, almost double the total number (43) produced in Colombia during the previous seven decades (1906–70).²¹ Given the still very precarious nature of anything that resembled an infrastructure (film schools, laboratories, etc.) necessary for such an industry to develop, this dramatic increase in numbers suggests flagrant opportunism more than sincere enthusiasm, because for the first time in Colombian history it was possible not only to recuperate the money invested in a film, but to actually turn a profit. As one critic commented, 'In the light of these economic circumstances, many sets of indifferent eyes opened, hands that had never so much as touched a film canister suddenly went to work ... from every corner there emerged new faces who knew how to make films.'²²

From this point on it becomes necessary to talk about a new genre of film-making referred to throughout the primary sources as 'el cine de sobreprecio' ('surcharge film'), which includes the approximately 600 short films produced between 1970 and 1980 that, rather than contributing to the consolidation of a viable industry, earned that straggling industry a lamentable reputation among Colombian spectators. It is difficult to generalise about the character of these films, because of their sheer quantity and because directors ranged from dilettantes to people such as Mayolo and Ospina or Arzuaga, open to testing the effectiveness of the legislation. To many critics and film-makers, this legislation was fatally flawed from its very inception in part because of the establishment of the notorious Comité de Control de Calidad (Committee for Quality Control) that rated each film according to its alleged quality, but which many argued often functioned as a covert system of censorship in order to weed out films of politically critical content.²³ One film that fell victim to this process was Mayolo and Ospina's *Asunción* (1975), in which a domestic employee endures incessant verbal harassment from her employers until one day, while they are on vacation, she reaches her limit, throws a party with copious amounts of alcohol and salsa music (at that time still the music of the working class), and abandons the house in a state of utter disarray. As Ospina said years later, it was their intention to create paranoia, as 'domestic employees represent a class enemy under the very same roof'.²⁴ In their use of non-actors – notably, *Asunción* was played by Mayolo's mother's housekeeper – the film had a naturalistic quality, despite its fictional nature and Buñuelian influence, which set it apart from the vast majority of 'surcharge films', most of them straight, and very poorly executed, documentaries.²⁵

19 Here Rodríguez is quoting Cuban film-maker Santiago Álvarez. Andrés Caicedo and Luis Ospina, 'Entrevista con Jorge Silva y Marta Rodríguez,' *Ojo al cine*, no.1, 1974, p.42.

20 *Cuadernos de cine*, no.1, March–April 1975, p.17.

21 These statistics are taken from *ibid.*, p.21 and Carlos Álvarez, 'Una década de cortometraje colombiano, 1970–80', *Borradores de cine*, no.1, 1982, p.40.

22 *Cuadernos de cine*, *op cit.*, p.22.

23 Among the most vocal critics of the Committee for Quality Control was Umberto Valverde, who argued that it was nearly impossible for film-makers to work within this context without subjecting themselves to self-censorship. See Umberto Valverde, *Reportaje crítico al cine colombiano*, Bogotá/Cali: Editorial Toronuevo Ltd, 1978.

24 Alberto Navarro, 'Entrevista con Luis Ospina', *Cinemateca*, no.1, 1977, p.24.

25 A major problem in Colombian cinema that is commented upon extensively in existing scholarship is that most professional actors were actually theatre actors, which resulted in exaggerated performances.

Alberto Aguirre, a writer for *Cuadro* (one of the many fledgling yet rigorous film journals that appeared during that decade) and among the most vehement critics of ‘surcharge cinema’, has identified two major tendencies within this massive group of films. The first group seemed to follow in the footsteps of the so-called ‘maestros’ with a series of picturesque films that resembled moving postcards and which pandered to excruciatingly trite nationalism: ‘with the motto “Colombia is magnificent”, [it is] tourist cinema that is insipid and manipulative and that lends its petty assistance to the reproduction of the system’.²⁶ But far more problematic were those works that represented the exact opposite impulse, or what Mayolo and Rodríguez in an article appropriately titled ‘El De\$precio del \$obreprecio’ (‘Di\$dain for the \$urcharge’) described as ‘pseudo-denunciation’.²⁷ The worst examples were documentaries that consisted of (often) previously recorded footage of subjects – ranging from poor families to street children, prostitutes, drug addicts or the mentally ill – hastily put together with an authoritative voice-over informing the Colombian movie-going public (anxious for the short to end so that the feature film could begin) about the social mechanisms that had precipitated such grave social ills (i.e. the armed conflict with its mass emigration of rural dwellers to the cities). In the absence of an in-depth analysis or attempt to explain these situations in other than formulaic terms, in addition to the failure to establish a real relationship to what was being filmed, ‘surcharge film’ was guilty of the worst kind of exploitation, one that justified its ambiguous intentions in a distorted and vulgar version of the call for cinematic realism famously articulated by Glauber Rocha in his 1965 text ‘Eztétyka da fome’ (‘Aesthetic of Hunger’).²⁸

In his posthumous memoir *La vida de mi cine y mi televisión* (*The Life of My Film and Television*, 2008), Mayolo recalls that ‘Latin America had become the best place for poverty. Obviously the cinema of this era ... was unable to hide it, nor could it refuse to recognise it. Poverty became *the* theme. Everyone began grabbing a camera to film the defects, the deformations, the diseases and scars of an unequal and impoverished Latin America. [...] They descended on the poor with their cameras, believing that with the simple act of filming, they were making a document about reality.’²⁹ In a similar vein, Aguirre wrote: ‘For lack of political rigor, *miserabilismo* is common in [surcharge] film that attempts to be critical. Poverty is morbidly displayed and discussed at length in order to provoke commiseration in a gesture similar to that which moves the bourgeoisie to pursue charitable acts.’³⁰ If in the 1960s the pioneers of Cinema Novo (Rocha among them) had called for a faithful cinematic representation of the country’s social problems as a form of resistance to both the lies of Hollywood and those of a military dictatorship eager to promote a positive image of Brazil abroad, by the 1970s things had changed. By then, *miserabilismo* (the representation of the poverty and violence of underdevelopment) had become an industry in its own right, and had been criticised for the spectacular, fetishistic and, above all, consumable character of the images that passively attested to the degree of estrangement that existed among divided social classes in Colombia (and throughout Latin America). The success of those few examples of ‘surcharge cinema’ that have survived can be attributed to the way in which images of marginality represented freedom from or resistance to the rigid social norms of a hierarchical, conservative society. It can also be argued that they romanticised a socio-economic other, with whom the film-maker and public might falsely and pretentiously identify, following a vulgar us-versus-them anti-imperialist logic.

One such film, alternately attacked and praised by film critics, was *Ciro Durán’s Gamín* (*Waif*, 1978), originally two separate ‘surcharge films’ about street children in Bogotá that Durán expanded into a feature-length documentary to great critical acclaim in Europe (it won awards at festivals in Leipzig, Bilbao and Huelva). The film documented a group of homeless children from an early age of presumed innocence – represented through almost bucolic images of youngsters happily frolicking in the streets – to an adolescence marked by petty crime that promised more hardened criminal behaviour to come. The explanation offered was that the domestic violence that caused these children

26 Alberto Aguirre, ‘II Festival de Cine Colombiano: Radiografía veraz de un cine embrionario y pobre’, *Cuadro*, no.3, 1977, p.11.

27 Carlos Mayolo and Marta Rodríguez, ‘El De\$precio del \$obreprecio’, *Ojo al cine*, no.2, 1975, p.9.

28 Translated by Randal Johnson and Burnes Hollyman, and reprinted in Robert Stam and Randal Johnson (ed.), *Brazilian Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 pp. 69–71.

29 C. Mayolo, *La vida de mi cine y mi televisión*, *op. cit.*, p.67.

30 A. Aguirre, ‘II Festival de Cine Colombiano’, *op. cit.*, p.13.

to take to the streets was the effect of the sense of desperation felt by their parents – typically rural dwellers displaced by the armed conflict to a hostile urban environment. On this theory Alberto Aguirre commented: ‘If you want to see paternal violence ... go to the countryside, where the paternal figure imposes his cruel authoritarianism in the home.’³¹ Luis Ospina happened to attend the Cannes Film Festival the year *Gamin* was presented, in what was the first Colombian representation ever at Cannes, and wrote: ‘Aside from drugs and coffee, our country is known abroad for its capital’s *gamines*. Articles and documentaries on this phenomenon abound on European television and in newspapers. [...] Here in France, the [Communist] Party has even come out with a comic strip about *gamines*, “Les petits enfants de la misère”. In the German magazine *Die Stern*, there was an article about *gamines* called “Die Kleine Banditen von Bogotá” (“Bogotá’s Young Bandits”).’³² Ospina maintained a feverish correspondence with Mayolo as he attended the major film festivals – where he witnessed what he referred to as a ‘crisis of cinema’ – and from Paris, where he was editing the final version of *Agarrando pueblo* (*The Vampires of Poverty*, 1978), a fictional caricatural documentary



Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, *Agarrando pueblo*, 1977, 28min, film stills. Courtesy of the artists

he and Mayolo had filmed the previous year.³³ Its authors hoped that the film would have enough of an impact to put an end to the proliferation of gratuitous images of poverty that dominated mediocre cinematic products not only in Colombia but throughout the Third World, and which Mayolo and Ospina appropriately termed *pornomiseria*.

In an unpublished text titled ‘Que es la porno-miseria?’ (‘What Is Poverty Porn?’), written in preparation for the film’s premiere in Paris in 1978, Mayolo and Ospina described the sad evolution that had taken place from politically committed independent

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

³² L. Ospina, *Palabras al viento: Mis sobras completas*, *op. cit.*, pp.149–50 and 340.

³³ This is the official English translation of the title. In France it was called *Les Vampires de la misère*. Ospina wrote, ‘In order to have some distance, I edited *Agarrando pueblo* in Paris, where, thanks to the generosity of Denise de Casabianca and the enigmatic Chris Marker (who I never actually met), I was able to finish the movie’. *Ibid.*, p.36.

film to ‘a certain type of documentary that superficially appropriated the achievements and methodologies of independent film to the point of deformation. In this way, poverty became a shocking theme and a product easily sold, especially abroad, where it is the counterpart to the opulence of consumption.’³⁴ Filmed in Cali and Bogotá, *Agarrando pueblo* follows an unscrupulous film director named Alfredo García, played by Mayolo himself, as he and his cameraman (played by Eduardo Carvajal, the film’s real-life cinematographer who worked on most films produced in Cali during those decades) move around both cities looking for unwilling subjects for a documentary commissioned by German television. Shot in 16mm, the film alternates between colour frames of footage shot by the directors and black-and-white images depicting the process of filming and other action off-camera. Beggars, abandoned infants, street performers and any mildly underprivileged-looking individual – such as a woman who, interrupted in her daily errands, unleashes a stream of expletives before aiming her bag at the camera – are fair game as the crew fulfils its quotas of poverty, though not without a certain sense of remorse. ‘I think that we came across like vampires ... like some fucking vampires who showed up there,’ says García at one point, to which his cameraman replies, ‘It’s too bad that that’s the stuff they make us shoot’.³⁵ And in fact, during much of the film, the nature of the relationship between the real film-makers and the subjects exploited by the fictional ones remains unclear, so that an already tenuous line between documentary and fiction begins to blur.

In Bogotá, the film crew descends upon La Rebeca, a well-known fountain in the city centre that, after years of neglect, had become a popular swimming spot for *gamines*. García’s character coaches the children with the promise of a few coins, an angry man delivers a harangue against the exploitation he is witnessing, in what seems to be perfectly scripted language. In reality, however, this man was a casual spectator who became enraged by what he saw, and violently threatened Mayolo off camera.³⁶ Ospina describes this scene as a *happening* – the film-makers placed two agitators among the group of onlookers who had gathered around the film crew in an attempt to solicit such a reaction. In the next scene García is in a hotel room and, just having emerged from the shower, negotiates the scene to be filmed later that day with Ramiro Arbelaéz, who plays himself and whose role was to interview a destitute couple in order to provide explanatory remarks that mimicked the voice-overs used in so many ‘surcharge films’. The actors who play the couple promptly appear with the film’s producer (a preppy but sleazy entrepreneur) to try on the torn and dirty clothing that will serve as their costumes, and the crew sets off – but only after García takes a moment to do a few lines of cocaine in the bathroom, in another instance that takes its cue from real life, as Mayolo was well known for (and unapologetic about) his drug use.

Back in Cali, the film crew finds its way back to El Guabal, the very same neighbourhood that had appeared six years earlier in *Oiga vea*, the work that initiated Mayolo and Ospina’s participation in this chapter of Colombian film history. And it is appropriate that they return to this same spot to provide a dignified sense of closure to a decade in which all of those ideals – specific to a particular historical moment now past but also, perhaps, the product of youth – had become corrupted and distorted beyond recognition. The crew begins filming in front of a decrepit wooden house selected without any regard for who might possibly inhabit it, when a recognisable figure appears: it is their old friend Luis Alfonso Londoño playing a furious and exaggerated (a bit too scruffy, a little too crazy) version of himself. He quickly jumps in front of the camera and yells ‘Ah, con que agarrando pueblo, no?’ – the very same words he had

34 This unpublished document (written in Spanish) turned up recently in the archives of Luis Ospina.

35 This film has been translated into English and subtitled.

36 This anecdote was revealed by Mayolo in an interview. Apparently the angry man had threatened to stab him, leading to a confrontation that ended, finally, in this collaboration. See ‘Entrevista con Carlos Mayolo’, *op. cit.*, pp.73–74.

37 This phrase is difficult to translate into English and means something like ‘to grab or seize the people’, but in an aggressive and potentially exploitative manner. According to Ospina, ‘Agarrando pueblo desde París’, *El Pueblo (Semanario Cultural)*, 11 June 1978. In ‘Entrevista con Carlos Mayolo’, *op. cit.*, p.73, Mayolo describes how the term came to acquire a negative connotation in relation to activities perceived to be exploitative, for example anthropology or sociology students conducting field research in marginal neighbourhoods but failing to return upon completion of their projects or foreigners taking pictures. ‘There was always a violent reaction against those individuals who attempted to invade these spaces without asking for permission or collaboration.’

used years before while Mayolo and Ospina were filming *Oiga vea*.³⁷ Londoño proceeds to argue with the film's producer, frustrating the latter's pathetic attempt at a bribe by pulling down his pants and wiping himself with the bills. He then disappears into his house, storms out with a machete (an object heavily associated in Colombia with class conflict and bourgeois fear) and expels the crew and actors from his lot. Finally, he spots a film canister on the ground, abandoned in the scuffle, and laughs perversely as he opens it up, pulls the film out, exposing and destroying its contents while dancing madly and draping himself in dozens of feet of film. The scene ends when Londoño abruptly freezes in a perfectly photogenic pose, looks to the side and asks someone off-camera, 'Quedó bien?' ('Was that okay?').

Amidst all the commotion that predictably erupted after the release of this film, one critic thoughtfully wrote, 'Ospina and Mayolo have succeeded in a straightforward and forceful critique, so well executed that in the darkness of the theatre one feels guilty to have participated as a spectator of all those works they indict'.³⁸ However, others lamented that, despite the effectiveness of its negative critique that 'would put an end to what had been a damaging genre for a national cinema and industry', *Agarrando pueblo* failed to offer a productive alternative for the development of that industry and, still worse, threatened to make any future attempts at cinematic social critique a taboo subject.³⁹ In an extensive interview following the film's recognition as 'best fictional film' in a competition sponsored by Colcultura, a governmental cultural institution, Mayolo disputed such claims, stating that while images of poverty had been justifiable within militant cinema, the commodification of poverty had made these images redundant for a public whose consumption of them was characterised by a sado-masochistic pleasure, or even indifference. Also problematic had been a tendency within certain instances of militant cinema itself to import models of critique from other Latin American countries (namely Argentina and Cuba) without adapting them to the peculiarities of a local context. Just as the best examples of militant cinema had attempted to critique economic exploitation from the position of those exploited, *Agarrando pueblo* similarly intended to gauge the reactions of the personalities behind those clichéd representations of *pornomiseria* in a work that questioned the very distinction between documentary and fiction.⁴⁰

If this film succeeded in denouncing the accumulation of obscene images of poverty and underdevelopment that had proliferated in cinema for almost a decade, it also broke with the assumption that social critique would necessarily find its most appropriate form in the genre of documentary filmmaking by implying that even the most well-intentioned attempts to faithfully represent a social problem are always already mediated. If *Agarrando pueblo* succeeded in contributing to the imminent collapse of the surcharge industry, it also provided a positive impulse to the development of fictional cinema in Colombia. In subsequent works by Ospina and Mayolo (produced individually rather than collaboratively) social injustice was represented via fictional characters such as sanguine landowners or their incestuous offspring and the image of the vampire became a constant – an idea that resembled Osvaldo de Andrade's notion of anthropofagy (cannibalism), but in an inverted and negative form.⁴¹ Most 'surcharge films' were eventually banished to the archives of the national cinematheque, where the film stock slowly deteriorated as historical amnesia about this decade of Colombia film gradually set in. But the idea of *pornomiseria* endured as a useful critical category within cultural discourse in Colombia – most recently in relation to certain contemporary art practices engaged with social issues but thought to be morally ambiguous. This opens up an entire new chapter in this history, the relevance of which extends far beyond this particular narrative or region – because as long as the structures that produce and in turn consume the obscenity of poverty remain in place, there will be ample opportunities for its exploitation.

38 Alberto Vides, 'Agarrando premio', *Diario del Caribe* (Suplemento), 18 June 1978, p.6.

39 Oscar Jurado, 'Agarrando pueblo y Cuartito azul', *Cuadro*, no.6, 1978, pp.2–3.

40 The last scene of *Agarrando pueblo* is an informal interview conducted by the film-makers with Londoño.

41 According to Haroldo de Campos: 'Antropofagia is the idea of the critical swallowing up of the universal cultural heritage, elaborated not from the submissive, reconciliant perspective of the "good savage" but from the disillusioned viewpoint of the "bad savage", the white-man eater, the cannibal.' Cited in Catherine David, 'The Great Labyrinth', *Hélio Oiticica* (exh. cat.), Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1992, p.252. While de Andrade's idea of anthropofagy sought to resist and transform a situation of cultural dependence, Mayolo and Ospina used images of cannibalism to represent the structures of exploitation that determine social relations in Colombia.