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Title: The Aesthetics of Violence in Colombian Film *Rodrigo D: no futuro*, *Apocalipsur*, and *Satanás*

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Abstract: Violence has become a central characteristic of the aesthetics of film in Colombia. This is apparent in three films of the last two decades: *Rodrigo D: no futuro* (1990), A*pocalipsur* (2007), and *Satanás* (2007). In the first two, violence is a part of different everyday realities, presented with aesthetic commonalities. In *Satanás*, violence produces a catharsis, understandable to Colombia's urbanites. In spite of the social differences among these films, there is a common discourse created from their different perspectives, and the result is the same: the triumph of violence over life, and the films' tragedy creates an ethical and aesthetic sense which does not adorn Colombian reality with false expectations. Do recent socio-political and filmic realities indicate new directions for Colombian film and society?

Keywords: Colombian film, *Rodrigo D*, *Apocalipsur*, *Satanás*, film violence

Resumen: La violencia es una característica central de la estética del cine colombiano. Esto está claro en tres películas de las últimas dos décadas: *Rodrigo D: no futuro* (1990), *Apocalipsur* (2007) y *Satanás* (2007). En las dos primeras, la violencia es parte de diferentes realidades y es presentada con elementos estéticos en común. En *Satanás*, la violencia produce una catarsis, comprensible para la mayoría de los colombianos. A pesar de las diferencias entre las películas, hay un discurso común y el resultado es el mismo: el triunfo de la violencia sobre la vida y la tragedia crea una ética y estética que no pretende adornar la realidad colombiana de expectativas falsas. ¿Es posible que las recientes realidades socio-políticas y fílmicas señalen nuevas direcciones para la sociedad y el cine colombianos?

Palabras clave: Cine colombiano, *Rodrigo D*, *Apocalipsur*, *Satanás*, violencia en cine
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The Aesthetics of Violence in Colombian Film *Rodrigo D: no futuro*, *Apocalipsur*, and *Satanás*

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Entre los años de 1989 y 1992 fueron asesinados en Medellín más de 25 mil personas, la mayoría de ellos menores de edad. Algunos llamaron a estos años el Apocalipsur.
Apocalipsur, Javier Mejía, 2007

For decades Colombia has been ravaged by violent conflict.[1] One of the results of continued violence is hundreds of thousands of people who have been displaced within their own country.[2] Estimates would suggest that Colombia has had one of the world's largest internally displaced populations (after the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Violence has been woven so deeply into the social fabric of Colombian society that no one knows who to trust, and anyone can unexpectedly turn into a perpetrator of violence. Many have had to live from day-to-day without any hope for the future and struggle for survival on a daily basis.

According to conventional wisdom, drug-related violence is the main threat to Colombian democracy, and annual data reveal a strong relationship between coca production and violence. But other studies show[3] that the relationships among drugs, violence, and the economy are not as clear cut as conventional thinking would suggest. With time, undoubtedly, what many Colombians have come to believe is that ultimately drug trade and violence flourish because of government's inability to offer viable solutions.

For some, if not for most, violence in contemporary Colombia has reached at times the level of humanitarian crisis. So ingrained into the Colombian reality is violence that it has become the structuring principle, the central characteristic of the aesthetics for film. Particularly reflective of this phenomenon are three of the best known Colombian films of the last two decades: *Rodrigo D: no futuro* (Víctor Gaviria, 1990), *Apocalipsur* (Javier Mejía, 2007), and *Satanás* (Andrés Baiz, 2007). Though these films are widely available, they may be more unfamiliar than other Latin American films; thus, a brief introductory summary of the films' narratives can be helpful.

The first film, *Rodrigo D: no futuro*, is a 1990 film from director Víctor Gaviria, and it is set in 1988 as it tells a fictional story based on the violent lives of young people in the drug- and crime-filled city of Medellín. The film focuses on Rodrigo, not yet 20 years old, and it opens with him in the last floor window of a downtown Medellín high rise building. He is about to jump into that city that invites, oppresses, and marginalizes him. He has no other options, he screams at the city. Time stops, and through flashbacks, some of his life and surroundings are narrated and described. Rodrigo is a frustrated artist, who wanders the film narrative listening to Sex Pistols tapes and trying to get a set of drums. The meandering plot really does not take the viewer anywhere, as its meanderings are meant more as a reflection of Rodrigo and his friends' aimlessness while they live their days making minor drug deals and stealing cars. Most serious violence happens off screen. The final violence and Rodrigo's despair are merely taken for granted.

Although *Rodrigo D: no futuro* is Gaviria's first feature-length film, it, along with

his subsequent feature productions *La vendedora de rosas* (1998) and *Sumas y restas* (2005) have confirmed him as a major figure in Latin American cinema. Further confirmation of his stature as a filmmaker is the now extensive bibliography of critical work dealing with Gaviria's filmic production. This critical bibliography has dealt with and made very clear the major elements of the director's filmic project, many of which are important to the focus of the present essay. Scholars have shown how Gaviria's films make the marginal central by bringing to the screen images and subjects which have been marginalized by processes of global or neocolonial discourses. With his "voluntad realista," (Gaviria's own words), his attempt is to move the consciousness of the viewing public toward solidarity by opening a space to the testimony of the subaltern. Though some have wanted to see Gaviria's neorealism as "pornomiseria," his filmic project implies an ethics of representation committed to bringing to the screen experiences which are sometimes incomprehensible (because of their violence or scorn for hegemonic values), creating a dramatic process of "doble devenir" in which margin becomes center and audience becomes margin.

Apocalipsur is directed by Javier Mejía. Released commercially in 2007, it won the prize as Colombia's best picture at the Cartagena Film Festival. It tells the story of a group of young people who travel around early 1990's Medellín when the city was ravaged by drug-traffic mafias. El Flaco runs away to London from his home in Medellín because of threats against his mother. Before he leaves, his friends give him a wild farewell party with a punk rock band included. Eight months later, he comes back to Medellín and finds that the city is the same war zone he remembers. El Flaco's best friends pick him up at the airport in their Bola de Nieve, a VW van in which they have traveled so much together that it has become everyone's refuge. Again, flashbacks are used to narrate the characters' pasts, particularly how they have come to be friends as well as their shared experiences.

Satanás is the first feature film directed by Andrés Baiz, and it is also a 2007 release. It is based on a book by Mario Mendoza. The Mendoza book in turn was based on the real events which ocurred at Bogotá's *Pozzetto* restaurant on December 5, 1986. On that day, Vietnam veteran Campo Elías Delgado, Eliseo in the film, massacred several people after having murdered his mother and others close to him.

The second of the films, Mejía's *Apocalipsur*, reminds viewers in the first few seconds that "in Medellín between the years of 1989 and 1992 more than 25 thousand people were killed, the majority of them minors."[4] For Colombian national cinema the question is: how to represent Colombia's violent ethic of the '80's and '90's in filmic form? For recent filmic production, the real world referent is too strong an element to be forgotten or to be ignored. The effort must be to find an aesthetic form where violence appears appropriately well-represented, and in order to do that, it is important to place the act of filming within a kind of similar reality. That is to say, to film from the inside, from the natural conditions of the very images which the film seeks to show, so that the rhythm of the real interactions becomes part of the rhythm of the filmmaking process.

It is possible to observe several formal steps in this process. On the one hand, film turns towards a documentary quality of reality with the use of non-actors. This is especially true in *Rodrigo D*, where the use of non-actors is an attempt to rescue from or draw out from the real man a series of behaviors which range from the linguistic to their way of walking and dressing. It is in this way that the object sets out to signify from itself, from its own reality. And, as Herrera points out, it is in this way that the effect is drama which these very non-actors collaborate in creating ("Ética, utopía e intoxicación en *Rodrigo D. no futuro* y *La vendedora de rosas*").

Another very interesting formal reference to violence in the first two films is the immediacy of image, that is, without lighting but

rather with ambient light and sound, noise. The clean aesthetic sense to which most mainstream films aspire, and which is very present in *Satanás*, though, is not present here. That kind of aesthetic polish places violence outside the frame, interpreting violence as a kind of collective condition, ciphered in a definitive aesthetic sign, without paying attention to the conditions of its specific context. In more mainstream, aesthetically polished films, violence has been taken out of its birthplace, manifesting a separation between the reality to which it attempts to refer and the very methods of filming it. In many films we are carried thematically close to the idea of violence, but we don't get to know it that way; instead, what we are exposed to is a rather decorated, dressed up violence, which is presented as excessively well-filmed, but as dictated by external narrative rhythms or through entertaining filmic takes and cuts.

Rodrigo D and *Apocalipsur*, films about the reality of poverty, are filmed from poverty, but the difference between them is in the protagonist social group. They all live within the same situation of violence, but for Rodrigo violence is part of an everyday reality. For El Flaco and his friends in *Apocalipsur*, it is an effect with which they are careful and reticent, and from which they will eventually free themselves or not; but, they are not the producers of that violence, rather they are its tangential consumers. This difference is very evident in the fact that the nature of the conversations in the two films is different: El Flaco allows himself poetic evaluations and philosophical abstractions about death, but death is a concrete reality in the world of Rodrigo.

For that reason, *Rodrigo D* is strongly documentary in its intention; the constant use of the *comuna* streets, houses, etc. is a source of that sense of violence. In *Apocalipsur* there is a separation of the group of youths from the reality of the streets; the individual leaves that reality and imposes his speaking self with a certain detachment. The characters in *Apocalipsur* do not live in the city, rather they flee from it; they hide from it, in their houses on the outskirts, in their van; they live from party to party; and when they want, they can take off for Europe. Reality in *Rodrigo D* is much more abrasive.

By mainstream standards, both films, however, are cheap visual productions. *Apocalipsur* seems almost to have been filmed with a video camera. This quality should be understood from the importance of the urgency or the need to speak. To express that kind of urgency, one cannot begin with notions of a cinema of high-budget filmmaking, where the production system and reality are almost incompatible. That intention of poverty appears everywhere, not only in the themes but in the images as well. The city, the backdrop where everything takes place, insists on showing the viewer its sidewalks, its locks on the houses, its motorcycles, but not trying to create a symbolism from the point of view of the unaccustomed eye, nor to create some *aprioristic* exoticism for the unaccustomed viewer, but rather to view it and its poverty as something natural.

When we notice that in a film there is too conscious of an effort to show a theme or motif, things appear false in ways which make them seem too ubiquitous, too universal, and too symbolic. In *Rodrigo D* there is no dramatic emphasis on poverty and violence created by the use of formal emphatic techniques, rather there is a rhythm of natural continuity, without any sort of additional dramatic effects. When violence is real, it does not have to be shown too much because the atmosphere of violence is felt. What is being shown is already too dramatic to need exaggerated reinforcement. The film relies on the ethical portrayal of the dramatic which is what carries the story; it does not rely on aesthetics.

The music is basically punk rock, and the driving, savage rhythm and the lyrics are enough to summarize what there is no need to say in the dialogue, like the songs about God and the devil in the land of the sun. Images direct and carry the story, and the

songs are summaries of the state of the world in which the characters live. The aggressive music adds something common with the first film, with the very character of Rodrigo: it is not performed by necessarily good musicians nor sung by good voices, but the attempt is not to please the refined ear. The important thing about punk, which is extended to the very importance of both of these films, is the urgency of its ethical message. This is even more incarnate, even more visible in the figure of Rodrigo, who is not a good musician, but who possesses an urgency to speak through his music, which has power.

The film is formed from this power, from the impossibility of telling a story referent to Medellín's society with an inflated blockbuster budget. But therein lies its worth, in the ability to use poverty to make images stand out. All of this is incredibly suggestive through the very story of Rodrigo, through his inability to find drums to play. But, lacking drums, he plays by banging on walls, on pipes, on objects in the street. To this purpose, a powerful reminder is the knife-fight scene, where the "soundtrack" is composed of the noises produced by Rodrigo's drumsticks on the wall.

But those noises are of interest, and they create emotion because they are created from within, from very real conditions. The film itself searches for the city. So too, Rodrigo's drumsticks search for the city in order to make music on it, on its walls, on reality itself, until finally for a short while he can sing and play on a borrowed drum set. Not separating itself from the city is the key which returns this film to a city of violence, to a city of poverty. The filmic discourse does not look beyond or outside, with formal imitations of any aesthetic, but rather it adopts the practice of an ethical sense to confer its own aesthetic to the formal mechanisms. There is no facile projection of aesthetic forms which could ignore the forms that reality possesses to present itself.

Though clearly there is selection process, sets are not planned or constructed, but rather they are real. The image is not beautiful, but rather important, urgent. Violent types in broken-down places are not adorned, they don't wear make-up; rather they are presented in their real form. The city seethes with destruction. There is immanent violence in everything: a city half-done, a city in the midst of being built, like the idea of society, of progress which never arrives, a provisional city.[5] And there, alongside the broken city, is the mountainside reminiscent of a past which perhaps never should have been left behind. We see the mountainside over Rodrigo's shoulder as he contemplates his leap. The broken streets are a mixture of city and countryside, a project and a projection of the impossible city.

Violence forms part of all phases of being, like games, which become violent with knife play, verbal violence, street noise, barking dogs. In the filmic aesthetics, there is no thought of the antiseptic, of the pleasant. There is a violence of style because the filmic discourse moves naturally through it without affectation. The characters live in a continuous state of survival, because of which they must develop defense mechanisms, like constant verbal attacks and being on guard to any circumstance which might arise. There is no security, even within the circle of friends, which, more than friends, are actors in the same game of survival; they use each other in order to subsist. Violence at times appears almost without real motive, like a way of just being, like when a man appears with a swastika on his tee-shirt, or the poster of death to the blacks where there doesn't seem to be racial protest as much as an inarticulate motive to violence manifest against everything possible.

Violence in gestures and language is omnipresent. Language is punctuated by persistent racism, sexism and homophobia. Here, sexuality is an important theme, and verbal aggression is evident when the guys create insults by "feminizing" the other. The female is identified as a sex object, in deed as well as in the way in which these characters

express themselves. In an *argot* punctuated by sexual or de-sexualizing epithet and insult, the constant verbal aggression among the guys is a marker for how language is an important element in the aesthetics of violence in these films. Linguistically, the aesthetics of violence takes two directions: aggression with language, and violence to language. In the first case, aggression with language, the characters' verbal expression is populated with the continual use of swear words carried by a strident (hopped up?) delivery. If the enunciation is characterized by the stridency of its delivery, even more characteristic is its violence to language itself. The pronunciation/enunciation of the characters quite frequently violates all notions of conventional comprehensibility, and it creates either a sense of aggressive rejection of that convention or a vivid recognition of their own marginality or both. So relaxed is their pronunciation, so particular is their lexicon, that, at times, the viewer loses any literal or figurative understanding of what is being said. What is not lost, though, is the sense of aggression. In the second case, violence to language, the interesting dynamics of *Apocalipsur* offer an illustrative example. Typical of the aggressive, de-sexualizing verbal expression of the guys, is the epithet "maricón," whose presence in these characters' verbal expression comes as no surprise to the viewer. What is a surprise is the violence done to this word in order to refer to and mete out the same sort of aggression towards Malala, the female among the friends. Doing violence to language by violating logic (even biology), the epithet "maricona" is created and often used to maintain aggressive quality of the expression when insults are directed towards Malala.

Apocalipsur is the social antithesis of *Rodrigo D* with its group of middle-class youths, consumers of the cocaine that the lower-class characters sell. There is in them a kind of social irresponsibility; they are unemployed youth condemned to live in a kind of limbo. They are touched by violence, but only as the final effect of violence, on the edge of dangerous situations but only tangentially. Their lives do not possess the urgency of danger since they are not directly involved in criminal situations.

It is important to see all this through the laughter, and the continuous parties, and through the space in which they live, shut up in their apartments like safe-houses.[6] The characters of the film continuously joke, and their conversations generally possess the inconstancy of the carefree. Friendship appears to be the form that binds these characters. In *Rodrigo D* laughter is hardly ever heard. There is a tragic air throughout this film; it is a quiet air, an atmosphere that is full of tension. But there are no existential tensions in *Apocalipsur*. Discussions are philosophical questions about man in general, like the idea of death. In one such discussion, El Flaco comes to the ludicrous conclusion, which is delivered in deadpan style, that "Y el problema es que uno se muere para toda la vida" (*Apocalipsur*). Or discussions center on the tedium of life, but they are presented as abstract questions which are not necessarily directly conditioned by social context. When the characters talk of death, it is the death of every individual to which they refer.

The characters in *Apocalipsur* experience the problems of man born into an extended time, which allows them to be conscious of their own lives, like their jealousies and love. Nighttime in *Apocalispsur* is full of "attractions," full of fiction, like the transvestite himself as a social actor who introduces tones of entertainment and diversion among the characters. Joviality and jokes are signs or symptoms of a free spirit. They have a lizard as a pet, and this is symbolic of a social group whose problems are pretty much resolved. They have no great conflicts, they keep up with fashion and style, and their observations about reality are more ideological than a real part of their lives, as when El Flaco says that "el Apocalipsis sigue estando aquí" (*Apocalipsur*).

In *Rodrigo D* there is a velocity to life that pushes it forward, that demands actions, and for that reason, there are no conversations

which have a practical, direct import. Death in *Rodrigo D* is an everyday, physical, temporal, present thing. Theory does not exist, only reality. Interesting here is the scene in which, in class, the teacher proposes the theory of human personality being formed by seven years of age, with questions of the soul, religion and eternity. We see that the characters who participate here in this class are socially different; they are still pure individuals who have not yet seen too much violence. These far too abstract topics would be of little interest to others who first need to guarantee their survival.

The timeframes and the cities of these films are different, but not the historical time, not the historical place. They are set in the same historical framework, the same mental time and place. *Rodrigo D* gives power to the night as the time when everything happens because the very conditions of darkness and obscurity favor the criminal, which is the driving survival force in the characters. The night is ever present because it is time as urgent, a time that with it come violence and poverty. The characters can hardly keep up with night's pace, as it swallows up everything. In *Apocalipsur*, thanks to that extended time which the middle classes live without immediate worries about survival, there is room to return to the past, to memories. In fact, the filmic discourse is made up of memories, those moments in which El Flaco and his friends met each other. There is nostalgia, which is a quality of time directed towards the past. In *Rodrigo D*, there is no time for these kinds of emotions.

The attitude of being disposed to the omnipresence of drugs is different in the characters of these first two films, as different, too, are the drugs used. In *Apocalipsur*, smoking marijuana and snorting cocaine are ways to belong, ways to consume, and ways to have fun, to escape the boredom of having too much time on their hands. Like their other conversations, in which ideas are discussed, not as a function of their own immediate reality, but as ideas, drugs and drug use, though a constant in their lives, are thought of on a meta-level. In the opening scene of the film with four of the characters high from smoking marijuana and reminiscing, Malala, for example, sets the tone as she announces that, "Los estados de conciencia alterados siempre son buenos, ¿no?" (*Apocalipsur*).

"Trabémonos, no hay más": in *Rodrigo D* there is a kind of conscious evasion or avoidance of the nervousness which is created by constantly being hunted and haunted, "tan sicoseado," by the continuous disappearances of people at the hands of death squads, the "escuadrones de limpieza" (*Rodrigo D*). The common deaths, the unknown bodies found in the weeds little by little end up being those of the main characters themselves. One can die at any moment, and death almost has a saving quality. We hear, for example,

> -¿Tú no quieres llegar a viejo?
> -Sabes que no quiero llegar a viejo, no quiero la vida de esclavo de todos aquí. (*Rodrigo D*)

To die young is the only way out. Joncito is a hero because he has died. And, those who survive him are "pobres huevones los que estamos aquí" (*Rodrigo D*).

The nearness of death teaches them of the naturalness of a short, dangerous life. But it is not the mythologized, romanticized idea where a young death comes almost as a choice. Rather in this case, it depends on external factors, from the death squads, from street attacks, from life itself which kills you. The presence of death is so strong that in *Rodrigo D* they speak of burials as a natural part of life. The characters plan and imagine their own burials. They are conscious of the nearness of their own end as something almost normal. They kill Ramón almost just to "sentir algo, para pasar un susto, hacer funcionar el arma," (*Rodrigo D*) just to feel something, to feel fright, to put the weapon to use. And this is exactly what Rodrigo does. He commits suicide; he kills himself in order to escape from an even more tragic end. For that reason we hear, "Mátate, mi amigo, mátate" (*Rodrigo D*).

Violence is everywhere in Medellín. It is present in the language, in the music, and even in gestures. In *Apocalipsur*, two of the characters meet while they are in their time of captivity having been kidnapped, and both films end with the death of their main characters. This ending again unifies the separation of the social classes and creates a common discourse from the different perspectives, from the different intentions. In spite of the social differences of the characters in the films, the end is the same: the triumph of violence over life. Tragedy in the films creates a sincere ethical sense, which does not attempt to polish the very rough edges of Colombian reality or dress it up with false hope. Nor does violence need to be repeatedly shown for the viewer to know it, and to sense its presence.

The third film, *Satanás*, Colombian Andrés Baiz's film, is the story of Eliseo, the name of the psychotic killer in the film. His story is told along with two other stories. One is the story of Paola, a dye seller wanting to escape poverty, and the other is the story of Ernesto, a priest who can no longer continue to serve God without falling into mortal sin.

The figure of the rebellious hero, who carries people's darkest desires as he restores and reaffirms their values, has always been a part of storytelling. But Eliseo is no traditional hero who sends the viewer out of the theater feeling lighter, with head held high, his rights defended, the evildoers vanquished, and moral, ethical and religious codes restored. Eliseo is more like a new kind of filmic character, sort of postmodern hero seen in films of recent decades, who acts for all of us, and through whom we vicariously live.[7] With traditional heroes, their "madness" can be quixotic, even virtuous. But, in the case of this English teacher, it is a question of a real mental illness. What remains the same is the marginality of the rebel, his non-conformism in the face of institutions. This seemingly timid subject living with his mother is far from the hero on a white horse and wearing a white hat. In action films we know who the good guys are, and who the bad guys are. In the case of serial killers or of the mentally infirmed, it is not a question of good and evil. The figure of the psychotic killer responds to much darker human dreams.

Andrés Baiz's 2007 film *Satanás* responds to this type of disturbing impulse. It is unlike other popular Colombian films, full of drugs and poverty which repeatedly explain violence. It is different when the killer in *Satanás*, the agent of our most hidden desires, kills without allegiance or ideology, against life itself. What, then, justifies the crime? The only thing that remains is the satisfaction of seeing, on screen, the realization of those obscure tendencies, and the societal institutionalization of violence after decades of living with it. The weapons are not in hands of a hero responsible for the community, but rather in the hands of a common citizen, who acts according to his own interests and impulses. It is not a question of justice, nor of criminal motivation, but rather of visceral release, of giving free reign to psychosis, to the intolerant in the human animal, and everything else falls to the side. There is no institution that matters. The final acts of the psychotic English tutor in *Satanás* release the brutal nature of a marginalized individual, left to his fate and betrayed by all systems.

But this new rebel, defender of the rights of the monstrous human, resentful killer from modern urban society, is an ambiguous creature, difficult to define. In *Satanás*, the indignation with injustice is neutralized by the demented hatred of a damned soul which threatens to break the fragile balance, but without anyone daring to condemn it.

As for the other characters in *Satanás*, the viewer knows what to hold on to. The former dye vender, Paola, is an attractive young woman who works as bait to attract customers for a couple of guys who give them the royal treatment at the bars and discotheques, and then rob them. The priest, named Ernesto, is fed up with sinning for love, and he is tired of listening to the sins of others. In *Satanás*, the atmosphere in which actions develop is one in which a careful artistic direction creates an

aesthetic common to Bogota's lower middle and middle classes, with some brief excursions into the upper class. Here, we understand the origin of the film's moral gaze as it sees this specific social sector as decadent and aloof to the pervasive injustice and violence.

There is no attempt at a New World, Spanish American, Latin American aesthetic. If, as spontaneous observers of our surroundings, we stop a second to contemplate the half-opened doors, the adobe shops, and the pretentious restaurants, we will notice that the same props and settings are repeated constantly in *Satanás*. There is nothing special in the sets; they reflect a customary urban style recognizable on the covers of magazines; and, even less special are the power outages and storm effects that accompany the climax of several scenes.

The film *Satanás* produces a kind of catharsis, understandable to the majority of today's urbanites, and understandable to Colombians who have lived decades of violence, and who do not have any confidence in the government or governing for finding any alternatives for improving their quality of life. But, Eliseo is not the only one there as the sum total of all evil. Also there is the priest, Ernesto, who maintains an amorous relationship with Irene, his maid, and who has lost all patience with God's poor souls.

In terms of the aesthetic of spontaneous violence, there is a memorable and impactful scene with Ernesto. This scene should make many viewers' blood boil, not so much from anger but from the pure delight of catharsis. It is the scene with the priest and the beggar. The priest is walking down the sidewalk, troubled by recent events. Suddenly, he is approached by an indigent who asks him for a handout in the most traditional and irritating way possible. Every city dweller or anyone who has visited a big city has been through this; certainly, every resident of Bogotá has been through it. But, different from what happens with the common citizen, fear does not overcome this servant of God, rather he turns into a beast, into a purger of streets and flop houses. He pushes the beggar man, and he kicks him within an inch of his life. He rejoices in it; he looks around to be sure no one is coming. Then, he just goes away, while the beggar whimpers. After this action, and confronted with the weeping image of the victim, the viewer feels vile. The violent aesthetic allowing for his own hidden desire for vengeance to be realized, the viewer can but repent, looking around to see if anyone has noticed his momentary joy. Every day in Colombia there are killings and lynchings, and they are not perpetrated by death squads; they are carried out by regular common citizens who are tired of robbery and abuse. These are spontaneous acts; it is violence incarnate in the masses, and violence becomes incarnate in the aesthetic of film.

Another memorable moment, and perhaps the most polemical of the film, is that of Paola's vengeance. She comes across the location of her rapists, and she orders them to be killed. The scene shows the criminals, only a few days earlier exalted in their violent, despicable act, transformed into frightened sheep. This is a moving image which could move the viewer to mercy, but which provokes a disturbing euphoria instead. This is how Paola wanted to see them. The executioners point their weapons at their captives' heads; the captives (despicable rapists) whimper and beg for their lives. "Perdóneme, niña" (*Satanás*) whines the worst and grossest of the whimpering rapists. Paola grabs their faces; she looks into their eyes, up close. Then, she turns and walks away. Suddenly, two shots are heard. The shots are heard off camera over the next scene, which is that of Ernesto, the priest, in the church thinking about leaving his robes so that he can marry Irene.

Even the murder of Eliseo's student, the rich girl with the dumb, pretty face, turns out to be darkly gratifying for the many resentful, screwed-up guys who live in nervous fear of pretty girls. The majority of these guys would not harm a fly: that is what Eliseo is for; he is the upside-down rebel who incarnates the unspoken, even unconscious,

desires of a society ravaged by decades of violence. This violence, more than any other, corresponds to the judging gaze which condemns a decadent sector of society which seems to live above and ignore the violence present everywhere else.

The aesthetic of violence in *Satanás* vindicates, perhaps to its own chagrin, feelings of vengeance and relief/release that that have become institutionalized after decades of violence, which disturb daily life in Bogotá, and which all urbanites nowadays suffer as a condition of life in large cities. Violence in the film produces a kind of catharsis, understandable to the majority of Colombia's urbanites, which is the space from which this view originates, as it soothes the frustration they have come to feel with successive governments' inability to find solutions for the country's intractable violence.

Socially, the characters in the films *Rodrigo D*, *Apocalipsur*, and *Satanás* are different. Different, too, is the violence, ranging from a natural, unquestioned part of reality in *Rodrigo D* to the apparently unexplainable and arbitrary in *Satanás*. In spite of the social differences and motivations, there is a common discourse created from their different perspectives, and the result is the same. It is the triumph of violence over life, and the tragedy of the films creates a sincere, ethical and aesthetic sense which does not try to adorn Colombian reality with false perceptions and expectations.

At a time in which some 2,500 books and articles have been written on the effects of TV and film violence on human behavior and society in the United States,[8] it is clear that the cause and effect relationship between violence and media is other, as it relates to film in Colombia. Societal violence and despair in the face of it have caused violence to become institutionalized not only within Colombian society but as an aesthetic in Colombian film as well.

A summary review of recent film production in Colombia would seem to corroborate this assertion. In 2008, for example, of the fourteen films produced nationally, five dealt heavily with violence, most notably among them, *Perro come perro*[9] by Carlos Moreno. Of the eleven Colombian films produced in 2009, four feature violence prominently.[10] And, from a total of thirteen, three of 2010's Colombian films center on violence,[11] while four of 2011's fifteen features owe their aesthetic to violence.[12] At the same time, however, it would seem there reason to speculate about a turn away from violence in Colombia, in film as well as in society.

In 2002, President Alvaro Uribe's government began a new strategy for Colombia ("Mano firme, corazón grande" was Uribe's campaign slogan) based on social investment in people's skills and aimed at demobilization of the paramilitary organizations. The strategy involves a reintegration process and since 2002, more than 52,000 Colombians have demobilized from illegal armed groups (the far-right Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia and the leftist FARC or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and joined the reintegration process. The results have been encouraging where most of the reintegrated work on new, peaceful lives. In recent years, indices of theft, murder, and kidnapping have decreased significantly. The challenge is to reach the causes of violence and achieve long-term peace and reconciliation.

For now, it seems that Colombian film is reflecting a less violent social setting in what Cuban director Humberto Solás ("[...] whenever you make a historical film [...] you are referring to the present" [Burton 1978]) observed decades ago and what historian Robert Rosenstone (*History*) echoes in affirming that films tell us as much about the time in which they are made as they do about the time they seek to portray. Though, as we have shown, violence continues to be an aesthetic which informs Colombian filmic production, since the relatively recent examples (2007 and 2008) of the institutionalization of violence as aesthetic in *Satanás* or *Perro come perro*, film in Colombia has relied less on violence. In the case of two 2011 productions (*El páramo* and *La sargento*

Matacho) it might be argued that, rather than violence structuring the aesthetic of the films, the aesthetic of the films is more appropriately explained as an attempt to come to terms with a traumatically violent past. And, in another 2011 film, *Todos tus muertos*, Carlos Moreno takes up violence again, but this time from a satirical, tragicomic point of view which also might signal a change of aesthetic direction. More importantly, perhaps, and more recently, Colombian national cinema has enjoyed critical success with films in which violence is not the structuring aesthetic. This is true in films like *Los viajes del viento* (Ciro Guerra, 2009), *Del amor y otros demonios* (Hilda Hidaglo, 2010), based on the novel of the same name by Gabriel García Márquez, *El vuelco del cangrejo* (Óscar Ruiz Navia, 2010), *Los colores de la montaña* (Carlos César Arbeláez, 2011), and *Porfirio* (Alejandro Landes, 2011). These films respond to other aesthetic imperatives, and as such they are reflective of a different present as they seem to eschew the aesthetics of violence and seek a new identity for Colombian national cinema.

Notes

[1]See, for example, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime report *Violence, Crime, and Illegal Drug Trafficking in Colombia*. Bogotá, 2006; "Colombia's Civil Conflict" at *BBC News*, (23 Dec. 2009). Web. 15 Feb. 2010.

[2]See, for example, Reuters "Killings, Violence Wrack Rural Colombia–Red Cross" (26 April 2010) at AlertNet. Web.

[3]See, for example, Jennifer S. Holmes, Sheila Amin, Gutierrez de Piñeres, and Kevin M. Curtin, "Drugs, Violence, and Development in Colombia: A Departmental Analysis." American Political Science Association. Web. 15 Feb. 2010; World Bank, *Violence in Colombia: building sustainable peace and social capital*, World Bank Technical Paper no. 451, 2000; Charles W. Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, Gonzalo Sánchez G., V*iolence in Colombia, 1990-2000: waging war and negotiating peace* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001).

[4]The film begins with the intertitle which reads, like the introductory quote to this essay: "Entre los años 1989 y 1992 fueron asesinados en Medellín más de 25 mil personas, la mayoría de ellos menores de edad. Algunos llamaron a estos años el Apocalipsur" (*Apocalipsur*).

[5]A suggestive motif here is construction or the idea of being under construction. Buildings are made up of cinder blocks, the building blocks of construction which await, before finding definitive space in a wall, just like the characters await, carrying out multiple functions. A cinder block can be somewhere to hide things; it can be a weapon; a cinder block can be the cause of accidents, falling on someone's head. This is interesting since the cinder block is the form of minimal expression of the city, but it is outside of it, it doesn't belong, like the characters who are condemned to the margins of life.

[6]While it is true that both sets of characters, those of *Rodrigo D* and those of *Apocalipsur*, belong to the city's peripheries, their space marks them differently as it relates to violence. The former come from the *comunas*, and they go to the city in search of survival, creating violence with their crimes. The latter live in residential areas, suburbs, and they belong to the "buena sociedad." They go to the city as consumers for diversion, though they may become victims of the violence spawned by the city.

[7]Reference is made here to films like the 1993 Joel Schumacher work *Falling Down*. In this film, William Foster, played by Michael Douglas, is an unemployed defense worker who acts for all of us, and through whom we vicariously live, when he abandons his car in the middle of a rush hour traffic jam, when he goes into a McDonald's restaurant, armed with a submachine gun and demands to be served an Egg McMuffin even though he has missed the time for breakfast by a few minutes, or when he shoots the golf cart of two pompous country clubbers. His is not the story of heroically stoic detective who strikes his shield against the halls of justice, but rather a simple office worker. He is not a romantic marked by the satanic sign, like Bruce Wayne, but rather a common citizen, with no virtues, who is not looking to disengage from the world he is trying to save. This seemingly timid subject wearing glasses, a tie and short sleeves is far from the traditional hero. It is not a question of good and evil. This new figure of the psychotic killer responds to a different set of dark human dreams.

[8]Since 1990, more than 2,500 studies of the effects of violence in television and film have been produced.

[9]Shown at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival and nominated for the Goya award as the best Spanish

Language Foreign Film, *Perro come perro* (Carlos Moreno) shows the low-life underworld of Cali. It features vengeance, torture, murder, and criminals incapable of respecting their own code of ethics.

[10]Reference is made here to: *El arriero* by Guillermo Calle, *El cielo* by Alessandro Basile, *La pasión de Gabriel* by Luis Alberto Restrepo, and Jorge Navas' *La sangre y la lluvia*.

[11]Of the 13 feature films produced in 2012, here reference is made to: Dago García and Juan Carlos Vásquez' *La captura*, Carlos Gaviria's *Retratos en un mar de mentiras*, and Rubén Mendoza's *La sociedad del semáforo*.

[12]Reference is made here to: *El páramo* (Jaime Osorio Márquez), *La sargento Matacho* William González), *Saluda al diablo de mi parte* (Juan Felipe Orozco), and *Todos tus muertos* (Carlos Moreno). *El páramo* and *La sargento Matacho* are films which deal with causes and effects of commando violence in the mountain countryside.

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