



Short Film and Documentary Third Cinema in Colombia: the case of Luis Ospina

by Felipe Gómez¹

Introduction

Short and documentary films from Latin America received wide international attention during the 1950s-1970s. Their critical legitimation came especially via a number of film festivals in the region. These included the SODRE (Uruguay, 1954); Viña del Mar (Chile, 1967), which centered its attention on film vanguards in Latin America; Mérida (Venezuela, 1968), which prioritized documentary films; and La Habana (Cuba, 1979 and thereafter). Much of the attention and acclaim achieved by the films followed the premiere screening of Fernando Solanas and Orlando Getino's monumental La hora de los hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces) in Mérida, and was tied to manifestos and documents written by Solanas and Getino themselves, along with those by Glauber Rocha in Brazil, Jorge Sanjinés in Bolivia, Julio García Espinosa in Cuba, and others. At the regional level the ripples of the Cuban Revolution and the tumultuous youth and student protests occurring in Paris, Mexico City and several Western cities after 1968 resulted in a polarized political climate. The times were inflamed by violent social confrontations, the multiplication of regional foci of conflict, and a world-wide movement toward decolonization spearheaded by some of the so-called "Third-world countries." When the common vision of a new "continental project" in cinema erupted (Pick), it stated an explicit intention to use the camera as a rifle and the projector as a gun, weapons for a "film-guerrilla" capable of participating in the global process of decolonization and liberation (Solanas and Getino, "Third" 34).

Despite being a country lacking a film industry and, according to Elena and Díaz López, "with no film tradition outside mimetic efforts to develop a commercial cinema similar to that of the main producers in Argentina and Mexico" (Introduction 7), Colombia was not in the least absent from the project of Third and New Latin American Cinema. Young Colombian filmmakers Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva, Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina debuted in this political and cinematic context with their first short and documentary films around the turn of the 1970s. Immersed in conditions of deepening political violence, and amidst a carefully staged bi-partisan pact of alternations in government which brought an end to a brief military dictatorship in the early 1950s, the country's economic, social, and political turmoil offered these emerging filmmakers and others like them urgent issues which needed to be addressed in innovative ways. The early Chircales (The Brickmakers, 1966-1972) by Rodríguez and Silva, and Oiga vea (Hear, see, 1971) by Mayolo

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and Ospina, as well as their subsequent Campeños (Peasants, 1975), and Agarrando pueblo (The Vampires of Poverty, 1978), would achieve international recognition as some of the key constituent pieces of the New Latin American and Third Cinemas, being judged as examples of “committed militant” and “truthful and inventive” shorts and documentaries (Caicedo 87-8). In this essay I provide an overview of the short films and documentaries made by Luis Ospina, one of the most prominent directors of the genre in Colombia since the advent of Third Cinema.² I analyze the early films made in collaboration with Mayolo, as well as later work directed by him in solitary, in the context of the Colombian and Latin American reality of production, distribution, and exhibition of films. Since Ospina continues to make relevant documentaries into the present, I consider his latest film, using it as an opportunity to emphasize continuities and changes along his more than 30-year-long filmmaking career. In so doing, I pose his work as a specific and distinct example of the roads traveled by short film and documentary Third Cinema in Colombia, albeit one which is not necessarily representative of the array of possibilities enabled by such type of films in this particular country.³

Third Cinema in a Colombian context—conditions within, conditions without

It can be argued that Third Cinema emerged in Colombia more from the convergence of several key social and cinematic conditions and situations—a number of which it shared with other countries in Latin America and the “Third World”—than as a conscious application of the theories being written and published throughout the region at the time. Before stopping to look deeply into the first short and documentary films made by Ospina in the 1970s, it seems necessary to contextualize briefly by glancing at some of those external and internal conditions and influences present back then, such as the ideas and concepts that allowed for the consolidation of Third Cinema, the existing channels for their circulation in Colombia, and the conditions for filmmaking in the country in the early 1970s.

² Luis Ospina was born in Cali, Colombia, in 1949. He studied film at USC and UCLA in California. Up to date he has made two feature-length fiction films and more than forty short films and documentaries. His work has received awards at the international festivals in Oberhausen, Toulouse, Bilbao, Sitges, Huesca, La Habana, Cartagena, and Bogotá. His cinema-related activities include efforts as a Film Club organizer, co-founder of the film magazine Ojo al Cine, teacher at universities, critic and chronicler for journals and magazines. He has also directed film workshops and edited several books. A collection of his articles and essays, Palabras al viento, was recently published in Colombia.

³ One need not look further than the films of Marta Rodríguez to find a case which originally had much in common with the work by Ospina but which has followed a diametrically opposed path along the years, remaining consistently tied to her earliest films in terms of themes, style, and cinematography.



While the resounding boom of Latin American short films and documentaries made after the 1960s could credit “realist,” “free,” and “direct” cinema, as well as cinéma vérité, among its sources of inspiration, it also received a boost from European audiences and critics (through festivals such as Pesaro, 1968) and a direct and undeniable influence from a number of European filmmakers including Joris Ivens, Chris Marker, Jean Rouch, and Arne Sucksdorff, who were among the creators and supporters of a documentary school for the region.

The work and the training performed by some of these following the Cuban Revolution greatly influenced the creation of institutionalized film organisms such as the ICAIC (the Cuban Institute for the Art and Industry of Cinematography), as well as the development of original film languages exemplified in the work of Julio García Espinosa, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Marta Rodríguez, Arnaldo Jabor, and Vladimir Herzog. Alongside festivals and filmmakers, Cuban publications such as the internal bulletin of the short films department of the ICAIC, Documental (1961), and the film journal Cine Cubano were instrumental in the creation of what would rapidly become known—at times rather indistinctly—as a New Latin American, Imperfect, Revolutionary, New (Novo), or Third Cinema (Paranaguá 50-53).

As did other films of the time, early examples of Colombian Third Cinema took advantage of some of the available new technologies (mainly the incorporation of direct sound and the use of portable cameras) which opened up the way for a number of new exchanges and possibilities, but also offered an anthropologic focus and a militant optic as means to constitute powerful critiques of institutions, class-based divisions, and even documentary filmmaking itself (Paranaguá 54, 57). The predilection for short film and documentary genres in the country and the region may have a number of explanations. Solanas and Getino, for instance, consider short and documentary films “the main basis of revolutionary filmmaking” (“Third” 34), and they attribute the genre’s importance in places such as Latin America to the neocolonial condition of societies “saturated with false information or directly lacking it.” This, according to them, requires “a cinema [...] which tends to supplement, in the relative measure of its possibilities, that void of information [...]. In our countries,” they state, “truth is proscribed; *the national truth questions the conglomerate of the neocolonial situation and transforms into subversion*” (“Prioridad” 461).⁴ The function of the documentary would thus be to become “a cinema of facts and irrefutable proof” which “reaches a total importance when confronted “against the ‘proofs’ of the adversary” (461). In short, documentary films in the region must assume the functions of counter-information and conscience-building, which are “inseparable from the establishment of new distribution circuits, apart from commercial theaters” (Paranaguá 54).

⁴ Unless otherwise noted in the list of works cited, all translations used in this article are mine and all emphasis comes from the original text.



Many of the documents of Third and New Latin American Cinema were originally published in European magazines, and did not reach interested audiences in Colombia directly, at least not initially. Despite the existence of a handful of film magazines which did their part in reproducing a few of these documents, the ideas and objectives of this type of cinema were often communicated more by the films themselves or accounts of them by those who traveled to film festivals. Circulation of the films within the country was also limited, but in this respect film clubs played an important role, becoming, in Mayolo's words, "the only cinema schools at the time."⁵ These filled up an important void of information which had caused, to continue citing the tongue-in-cheek words of Mayolo, the names of the Brazilian soccer player Garrincha (Manuel Francisco dos Santos) and the filmmaker Pereira dos Santos to be confused by young filmmakers like himself.⁶ "Some information reached us through Cuban films, but we did not know them well" ("Entrevista" 18). In terms of exhibition and distribution, film clubs also offered, along with film festivals and universities, alternative and more desirable channels from the point of view of Third Cinema, since the mainstream channels were assumed to be "in the hands of the enemy" (Solanas and Getino, "Third" 34).

On the other hand, Colombian short and documentary films did have a significant but still limited access to audiences in commercial theaters after 1972, when the Ley de sobrepuestos (the "surcharge law") stated that a Colombian short film should accompany every new release in the country, devoting percentages of the surcharge on admission prices to the producers, exhibitors, and distributors of the films in proportions of 40/40/20. One of the objectives of this law, which seemed to envision short films as a "childhood" stage of filmmaking, was for directors and producers to accumulate experiential knowledge (on artistic, technical, and budgetary matters), and a monetary capital with which to finance the production of a feature-length film. The results of this initiative were not the desired ones. Many of the most prominent Colombian filmmakers characterize this period as one dominated by a lack of objectives, research, and construction, as well as a "mafia-style behavior" from everyone involved in the film industry.⁷ Most critics and filmmakers agree nowadays that while the number of short documentary films made and shown grew exponentially during this period, these were usually "low-quality shorts"

⁵ Carlos Mayolo, interviewed, as seen in Ospina's De la ilusión. During this period, a series of film clubs sprouted in the principal Colombian cities, projecting mostly non-Hollywood films coming from the United States and Europe, with some space for Latin American and Colombian films as well. Also importantly, film clubs traditionally opened a space for the discussion of these films. Ospina and Mayolo's association with Andrés Caicedo's Cine Club de Cali (the Cali Film Club) and the film magazine Ojo al Cine was important in this respect. See Martínez Pardo, p. 420-30, for a complete list and description of film clubs active in Colombia at the time.

⁶ See the interview by De la Vega Hurtado.

⁷ See Chapter I, "Del sobrepuesto al menosprecio," in Luis Ospina's documentary De la ilusión al desconcierto: cine colombiano 1950-1975.



produced by “mere businesspeople.”⁸ As far as the public goes, the desired results were not reached either—audiences were often discouraged from attending the theaters due to the dreary repetition of the same shorts and their prevailing low quality, convinced also that “what they saw on the screen represented national cinematography” (Figueroa, 73).⁹

The Seventies: The praxis of Third Cinema in Ospina’s early films

Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo are considered to be among the founding members of the so-called Grupo de Cali (“The Cali Group”), an interdisciplinary collective of young people which also included fellow writer and film critic Andrés Caicedo, and other artists and intellectuals growing up in the Colombian city of Cali between the 1950s and the 1970s. Members of the Grupo collaborated in a number of important film projects during the 1970s, including the Cine Club de Cali (“The Cali Film Club”), the magazine Ojo al cine, and the realization of several documentary and fiction films. The first short documentaries made in collaboration by Ospina and Mayolo in this decade were Oiga, vea, Cali: de película, and Agarrando pueblo. These use a series of resources to expose and counter what Solanas and Getino would call in their manifesto—following Juan José Hernández Arregui’s Imperialism and Culture—the *bilingualism* of the neocolonial situation, i.e., the coexisting and competing “cultural patterns of thinking” endorsed by, on the one hand, “the rulers” or “the classes subordinated to outside forces,” and “the nation” or “the people” on the other (Solanas and Getino, “Third” 35, 37).

Whereas Ospina’s first experimental works—created as a student of film at USC and UCLA—showed more of an interest for the concepts and language of cinema, and for various historic audiovisual vanguards (Cruz Carvajal, “Ospina” 236), the exposure and treatment of cultural bilingualism is already evident in some of Mayolo’s first short films, Quinta de Bolívar (1969), Iglesia de San Ignacio (1971), and Monserrate (1971, with Jorge Silva). In these three short films Mayolo sets out to work within and subvert the genre of the short tourism documentary with the clear purpose of attacking powerful national structures, symbols, and institutions such as the Catholic Church.¹⁰ Through acidly humorous juxtapositions of images and non-synchronous sounds, these films explore and expose landmark symbolic spaces which are sites of mystic,

⁸ See for example “En busca del cine perdido;” Cruz, “Agarrando” 280; King, 211;

⁹ According to figures cited in Figueroa (73), only about 5% of the 856 shorts produced during *Sobreprecio* currently survive. A total of 131 new directors and 164 producing companies debuted between 1970-80, and this was due in part to exhibitors who decided to circumvent the extent of the law by producing their own shorts in order to distribute them and to new producing companies that were formed once the limit number of shorts contemplated by the law was reached by an older one.

¹⁰ These three films were in fact commissioned by a tourism agency. See Navarro 71.



religious, and tourist pilgrimage in the Colombian capital, Bogotá. At the same time, the films attempt to suppress the artificial division between sacred and popular spaces, creating in the audience surprise, laughter, and conscious awareness of the implications of their coexistence. Through these two strategies, Mayolo was able to start forging what Colombian critic Hernando Martínez Pardo called “a new type of relationship with the spectator” (241), one germinating from a sense of complicity between audiences and the filmmaker, and demanding from the former an active interpretative stance.

Techniques and resources explored in Mayolo’s first shorts are further developed in films made later in collaboration with Ospina to consolidate a relationship with spectators from the popular sectors of society, to the point of offering them an opportunity to participate in the creation and performance of the film. Ospina’s first documentary, *Oiga, vea*, sought to bring this relationship one step closer while taking advantage of the opportunity granted by the VI Pan-American Games hosted in 1971 by their native city of Cali. For the filmmakers, the sense of urgency overcame the need for logistical procedures, and they dedicated themselves to document the scene separately, meeting daily to talk about the sequences they had filmed and the sound they had recorded to produce a 28-minute documentary filmed on a B/W 16 mm camera that Mayolo “borrowed” from the ad agency he worked for.

Despite a history of urban and political violence and social, racial, and ethnic disparities and discrimination, the Games were being used by the government and other interested parties to portray the city and the country as “civilized” and “modern” enough to host such an event. Furthermore, it is communicated through the event that Cali can and should be regarded as a “City of America” worthy of benefiting from US President J.F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, and therefore capable of participating in an increasingly US-dominated global economy. Given the polarized Cold War tensions of this historical moment following the Cuban Revolution and critical events such as the invasion of *Bahía Cochinos* (Bay of Pigs) and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the issue of political and economic orientation would naturally be of uttermost importance, and would be projected into the sports arena, where the two strongest national delegations to the Pan-American Games were precisely those of the United States and Cuba.

In this context the filmmakers decide to take a stance that will ultimately define the film as a Third Cinema product. Given the denial of an “official” permit with which to access with their camera the enclosed, guarded spaces where the Games are being held, Ospina and Mayolo resort to making their film from outside the brand new Olympic Villa, and they decide to do so aligning themselves with “the people,” that vast section of the population marginalized from the event but “forced to contribute with their tax money to an incommensurable expense that it scarcely knew about” (Cruz Carvajal, “Ospina” p. 238). As fellow *caleño* film critic and writer Andrés Caicedo Estela recalls in his magazine *Ojo al Cine*, some of the interviewees among the people of the common included in the film lucidly interpret that the event is used by the



regional and national governments as an opportunity to project a paradisiacal spectacle of tropical peace and prosperity before national and international audiences (“Oiga vea” 52). Both the filmmakers and the film succeed in positioning themselves within the subaltern position not only because of the formal exclusion they share with “the people,” but also through conscious resources employed which approximate their roles in spectatorship, such as the constant inclusion of the audio-recording device inside the film frame, the acknowledgement of the presence of the camera by stares and gestures toward it, besides an interest in the photographic and recording devices of the individuals interviewed and recorded (Caicedo Estela, “Oiga vea” 51).

From within the outside in which it situates itself, the film seeks to achieve the decolonizing function upheld by the manifestos of Third Cinema. It does so by generating a rich source of counter-information in which the “official” version of the Games is dialectically confronted and contrasted with the experience of the common people who go on with their lives amidst impoverished economic conditions and official abandonment. The non-synchronous sound of the President’s speech inaugurating the games, rife with demagoguery and populism; the apparatus, gestures, and affiliations of the “official cinema;” or the means of repressive social control evidenced by the ubiquitous presence of police and army units, constitute pieces of the acute backdrop against which the lives and opinions of the subaltern acquire texture and relevance. The juxtaposition once again induces filmmakers, interviewees, and audiences to bond in a reflection on the connections between living conditions and the alluring spectacle of the Games.

Technical mastery and the creative edition of audio/visual recorded material, combined with ideological intent, are among the characteristics which make this film revolutionary in its conception and realization. In an often-cited sequence of the film in which accomplished camerawork, ideological intent, and conceptual genius converge (Caicedo Estela, “Oiga vea” 54; King 210), the camera witnesses a diving competition, focusing in on the diver just before the leap, then dramatically and unexpectedly zooming “out of the pool, out of the building, behind a wall and behind the backs of the people waiting outside, excluded from the spectacle by their poverty” (King 210), poignantly evidencing through a mechanical procedure the frustration and exclusion of those who stand outside the coliseum, the filmmakers included. On the other hand, the freshness, humor, and ingenuity with which the filmmakers approach their subjects and merge in a profound relationship with popular audiences also contribute to give this film a revolutionary direction. Throughout the film, black humor is used in a provocative manner to “evidence a *malaise* in culture” and to incite among audiences reflexive thought and debate, an idea often cited by Ospina among his main objectives and one which is closely aligned with the Third Cinema principle of disrupting the normal passive relationship between



spectators and the screen.¹¹ Humor, and in particular an Alfred Jarry-style “pataphysic” view of things—i.e. a violent sense of humor and of ridicule which causes one to see things seriously (Bernal 23)—will in fact end up constituting one of the most prominent characteristic of the films by Mayolo and Ospina.

Oiga, vea—along with Rodríguez and Silva’s Chircales— pioneered the development of short film and documentary Third Cinema in Colombia, opening new possibilities in terms of filmic exploration and expression, and relationship with audiences, besides generating new interest and venues for non-commercial exhibition. But whereas the importance of Ospina and Mayolo’s film in inaugurating the era of militant films is widely acknowledged, their short documentary/fiction film Agarrando pueblo (The Vampires of Poverty) is recognized as a film which closed off that entire era—i.e., there is a definite “before” and an “after” Agarrando pueblo in the field of social documentary (Cruz, “Ospina” 238). The decade before this film was made, the sociopolitical and cultural processes initiated in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution had started generating a way of making documentaries which had increasingly called the attention of European critics since the mid-1960s, and their critical support had a direct subsequent incidence in the foundation of a new Latin American film cannon. Especially after the 1968 Pesaro festival, “Europe was starting to avidly consume anything coming from South America that contained a bit of folklore or ‘revolution’” (Martínez Pardo 320).

Some Latin American filmmakers quickly started showing skepticism toward these forms of external support, calling for the replacement of foreign evaluation criteria for ones responsive to local realities (Pick 17). In the Colombian context, film critic Hernando Salcedo Silva pointed out in a 1968 column of the leading liberal newspaper El Tiempo the pervasiveness of “a conversational kind of Marxist snobbism” deforming these “political” documentary films, which often had more to do with foreign clichés than with Colombian political reality (Martínez Pardo 322). The situation was only intensified by the Colombian government’s institution in 1971 of the Ley de sobreprecio and the establishment of the film development company, FOCINE, in 1978. Numerous mediocre short films were made during this period that profited from the exploitation of socioeconomic misery through a simplistic reproduction of the structure of the social documentary, creating for European TV and film festival audiences an abusively voyeuristic treatment of abjection that Mayolo and Ospina would denounce in Agarrando pueblo as “pornomiseria,” or ‘pornographic misery’. Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva’s dire warning against the “dangers of schematizing reality and films, of accepting without analysis any short film of counter-information” spoke to the facile reproduction of the structure and abuse of images employed by this type of films which did not care for the development of a methodology nor for the benefit of

¹¹ See for instance the interview with Ospina in González Uribe and the quotes used by Muñoz. Regarding the disruption of the passive relationship between the audience and the film, Solanas and Getino quoted Fanon: “every spectator is either a coward or a traitor.”



its “objects” (Martínez Pardo 391). Due to an inclination toward mass-producing in order to satisfy the demands of foreign audiences, the initial Third Cinema postulate of working *with* the people had given way to a formulaic type of cinema which used the people as “fetishized subjects” (Moreiras 198), raw materials to be rapidly assembled in a simplified manner onto a pre-fabricated object.

Agarrando pueblo (The Vampires of Poverty) was a parody directed against the vices of this type of “social” and “testimonial” cinema (Cruz, “Agarrando” 281). In the film, two such filmmakers travel around impoverished sectors of the cities of Bogotá and Cali in search of the images of abjection needed to complete a documentary commissioned by German TV. With a brilliant use of black humor, and the concept of the film within the film, a silent B/W camera allows audiences to document the “vampire” filmmakers’ itinerary as they induce, capture, and recount color images of beggars, prostitutes, children who live on the streets, and a whole list of marginal urban characters they must include in their production. Some of these characters also receive a few coins from the filmmakers to allow them to be recorded “*au naturel*,” or to represent themselves in images that speak of the extremes reached when trying to imitate Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri’s famous short Tire die.

One of the most memorable sequences of the short is that in which the fictional filmmakers receive an interpellation from “the people.” The whole crew has gathered in front of a humble shack which has been deemed an appropriate setting for their documentary. A group of paid actors performing as an impoverished family responds to the questions of an interviewer according to a script they have been asked to memorize. At this time, the true inhabitant of the site enters and confronts the crew, interrupting the film in the face of a first effort to quell him using the police. When the producer tries to bribe him with a roll of bills, the individual asks: “*A ver, a ver, ¿cuánto valgo yo?*” (“Tell me, how much am I worth?”) before pulling down his pants and wiping his bottom with the money in an act of absolute disregard. After chasing everyone out of his property with a machete, this character stands in front of the B/W camera as he goes through the roll of color film, reviewing and parodying the predictable, superficial nature of the “documentary” film. He finally assumes the role of the filmmaker when ordering the B/W camera to “cut,” but then pauses as if stepping out of his role and back into his natural self, looks straight at the lens and asks: “*¿Quedó bien?*” (“Did it come out alright?”). The film thus gains a self-destructive ending coherent with its counter-cinematographic principles (Cruz, “Agarrando” 282).

As I argue elsewhere (Gómez 126), this character appropriates the role (and thus the language) of the director, deterritorializing it in the same way Caliban does with Prospero’s language in Shakespeare’s The Tempest. After the “end” of the “documentary,” a testimonial segment follows in which Ospina and Mayolo interview the natural actor regarding his role in the film, the film itself, and the genre of social and testimonial cinema. The segment plays as a dialogue



between organic intellectuals and “the people” in which the actor is able to communicate in particular his idea that those who make the kind of documentaries that the film parodies “are not in search of what is being filmed but of the color money,” and warns spectators to be watchful and not to allow photographic or filmic images to be sucked from them for the economic benefit of others.

As indicated in the film’s subtitle, The Vampires of Poverty, these filmmakers are thus equated to vampires who feed off the sweat, misery, and blood of subaltern, marginal subjects. The process of vampirization is what Moreiras so poignantly has characterized as “the production of abjection where the producing agency [...] retains an aura that has been literally sucked off the testimonial subject, now abjected” (203). In other words, “a certain originary and founding outcasting whose most concrete task is to produce empowerment, but whose most precise discursive result is the constitution, or [...] the repetition of a realm of social unlivability” (201), in which “[the] other is always suffering from a certain inability to speak” (210). Having access to the means of representation, these filmmakers decide to make them available to “the people” so they can both fight against the prosperous vampires of poverty. By resorting to the device of the film within the film, inviting natural actors to participate in the creation of the script and to represent themselves consciously, and asking them to actively question documentary filmmaking during the interview segment, Mayolo and Ospina are once again able to produce a revolutionary film that demolishes the conventional deformations of the act of filming and of a way of industrially “capturing” reality, while also employing “laughter as a political dart in its purpose to create reflection through provocation” (Cruz, “Agarrando” 279, 282). On the other hand, their short film brings to the forefront the use of fiction as a powerful tool for militant cinema as described by Solanas and Getino: the possibility “that the documentary dimension [... could be] enriched by fiction (recreation) as well as other expressive resources” in order to reach the greater goal of “illuminating through testimony (documentary) a concrete historic or political situation,” always within the “politics of *construction* and *destruction*, made, critiqued, and deepened in conjunction with the people” (“Prioridad” 461-2). Rather than blindly employing fiction to strengthen the documentary genre, Ospina and Mayolo use it to attack the corruption of the prevailing genre and to bring in a new kind of “anti-documentary” (Bernal 23), which paradoxically illuminates truth through the use of fiction. This will provide an important connection with Ospina’s most recent film, which I will get to toward the end of this essay.

The Eighties and Nineties: In search of new strategies and audiences

Following the suicide of fellow Grupo de Cali member Andrés Caicedo, and the establishment of the Colombian film development company, FOCINE, the eighties started off as a decade for restructuring and experimentation in



Ospina's career. At the beginning of the decade much of his and Mayolo's energies were directed toward the creation of first feature-length fiction films, but later they both—in separate and different ways—adopted the video format, redirecting their work for the massive and anonymous television audiences, which were so different in nature from the small audiences they used to reach with earlier work. These two elements would become Ospina's key tools for creating documentary work addressing his preoccupation for preserving the memory of his city and region in Colombia.

After a very fruitful and significant work in tandem in the context of Third Cinema production during the 1970s, Ospina and Mayolo would continue collaborating sporadically in several cinema projects, albeit not in the director's chair. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Mayolo directed a pair of feature-length fiction films under FOCINE and increasingly drifted away from film- and documentary-making despite an obvious and outstanding talent for it, forging instead a successful career as a *telenovela* (“soap opera”) director.¹² He died in 2007, shortly after receiving a Lifetime in Cinema Achievement Award from the Colombian Ministry of Culture.

Aside from the feature-length fiction film *Pura sangre* (*Pure Blood*, 1982) completed under FOCINE, Ospina's documentary work during the 1980s features a trilogy constituted by *En busca de “María”* (*In Search of “María”*), *Andrés Caicedo: unos pocos buenos amigos* (*Andrés Caicedo: A Few Good Friends*), and *Antonio María Valencia: música en cámara* (*Antonio María Valencia: Music on Camera*). These films clearly show the first steps into what is now Ospina's established effort at preserving the historic, cultural, and cinematic memory of a city and a country that greatly lacks the vision or the instruments to preserve it. Being documentaries “based on the word,” they rely heavily on interviews, constituting a style which will become characteristic of Ospina's films, and which shows a strong influence of filmmakers such as Emil de Antonio and Marcel Ophuls (Bernal 22, 24). Interestingly, Ospina's films are usually made without a pre-existing script, in accordance with his stated desire to let intuition guide him (Bernal 23). The first one of these takes as its subject the lost reels of the first feature-length film in the history of Colombian cinema (*María*, 1922; based on the romantic novel by Colombian writer Jorge Isaacs), and it develops this subject by using historic *mise-en-scènes*, archive materials, and interviews (Cruz, “Ospina” 239). The other two films are interesting attempts at creating biographic memories of two important characters in the cultural history of Cali. In *Andrés Caicedo*, Ospina interviews a group of friends and relatives of the writer, film critic, colleague and personal friend of his, who committed suicide at age 25 in 1977. Interspersing testimonials with archive materials drawn from Caicedo's life and work, Ospina aims at preserving his memory in a city that seems to have forgotten him after less than a decade. His initial purpose is to structure the film around an “incipient film,” the unfinished

¹² During the 1990s Mayolo directed several TV series and *telenovelas*, among which *Hombres* and *Azúcar* reached large audiences and received national and international acclaim.



fiction feature-length Angelita y Miguel Ángel, which Caicedo and Mayolo stopped co-directing due to discrepancies and lack of funding (Bernal 22). Antonio María Valencia likewise intends to rescue the memory of a pioneering figure in the musical and artistic culture of Cali from the oblivion it has fallen into.

Facing difficulties associated with high costs and local distribution and exhibition, especially following the crisis and stagnation of FOCINE, Ospina adopted the video format in the mid-1980s and, as Mayolo, aimed most of his production for television audiences, especially at the regional level. Still working with the overall objective of preserving the cultural memory of his region and generation by working on realities which have ceased to exist (Bernal 22), the documentaries he made during this period were critical visions of the architectural destruction of the city of Cali—a theme already announced in the last scenes of Oiga, vea (Cruz, “Ospina” 240)—at the hands of centralized and often foreign-induced ideals of “progress” on the one hand, and by the overwhelming influx of economic capital pouring into the construction business from the recent—yet already blooming—business of drug-trafficking during the 1980s. The most remarkable works in this part of his production are a series of 25-minute shorts for a program series in the regional *caucano* television called Rostros y rastros, where he delves into the architectural, artistic, and popular memory of the city while also researching into the lore and occupations of artisans, shoe shiners, hairdressers, or taxi drivers working in the more marginal or informal sectors of Cali’s economy. His documentary work for television continued well into the mid-1990s and recently added a new chapter with De la ilusión al desconcierto, a series of shorts commissioned by the national film archive on the history of the relationship between filmmakers and the Colombian State between 1970 and 1995.

Into the present: Ospina’s development of the biographic documentary

Ospina’s work for television throughout the 1980s and part of the 1990s, along with his work as a university professor, originated an important school of video-makers in the city of Cali and the Valle del Cauca region, sowing an essential personal, regional, and generational memory. It was also a necessary stage in Ospina’s process of discovering, digesting, and perfecting what has become his signature documentary biographical essay, in which the subject is used as a pretext to investigate deeply into the current state of things (Cruz, “Ospina” 242). Ospina’s development and perfecting of this genre can be witnessed along three of his most recent works, Nuestra película (*Our Film*), La desazón suprema: retrato incesante de Fernando Vallejo: (*The Supreme Uneasiness: Incessant Portrait of Fernando Vallejo*), and Un tigre de papel (*A Paper Tiger*). Ospina had once stated that he would “never be able to make a film that didn’t have to do with [his] city” (Bernal 24). However, for the first time in his career these films started exploring themes, characters, and places not directly related with Cali. After briefly delineating the main elements in the first two of these, I



will concentrate more fully on his latest film, in which I see a clear locus for comparison with the beginnings of Ospina's career and with the principles of Third Cinema present in that body of work.

The first of these three films was commissioned by Colombian artist Lorenzo Jaramillo as he struggled through terminal stages of an AIDS illness and approached the moment of his death. Inspired by Wim Wenders' Nick's Movie/ Lightning Over Water, Ospina develops a film in which the protagonist leads the director and the latter's work is essentially documenting the way in which death grows and expands to the point of taking over space and time. In collage-style short chapters structured around the five senses, the conversations between filmmaker and protagonist bring up cultural references, as well as hommages to images and the history of cinema, and end up questioning the role of the documentary-maker and her/his power over what is said in the film (Campo 26). The conventions of the documentary interview are also transgressed in this film, which opens up with the filmmaker knocking at the interviewee's door, revealing his presence in ways that go beyond phantasmagoric traces usually limited to the framing and the voice off screen.

In La desazón suprema Ospina interviews and portrays the polemic exiled writer and filmmaker Fernando Vallejo (known to many in Colombia as "the monster"), one of the most important names in Colombian literature after Gabriel García Márquez. In this film he shows an "unbiased conception toward images" exemplified in the fragmentation and relocalization of materials (Oroz). As with Nuestra película, this film explores the autobiographical essay in a personalized way that is reminiscent of some of the works by Jean Beauvais (Fernández 53). Besides departing from the city of Cali as a cinematic theme, in these recent films Ospina also leaves behind his earlier preoccupation with subaltern or marginal subjects and with popular arts and culture, and thus distances his work from the initial propositions of Third Cinema which seemed to have deeply informed his earlier work. Instead, he consistently focuses on male figures representing manifestations of high culture such as literature, fine arts, and music, a tendency already evident in his work on Isaacs, Caicedo, and Valencia. Although by looking at his subjects it may be argued that one of his newer preoccupations is the figure of the gay male figure of culture (e.g., Jaramillo, Vallejo), it seems more likely that he is increasingly interested in the figure of the "mad genius" or the polemical artist who is also solitary, devoid of a family, and despised or ostracized by society. In any case, as it was true with much of his work during the eighties, these later films are mainly aimed at preserving the memory of individuals from oblivion, which Ospina repeatedly equates to death. But even if this may be a point of departure for these films, the subject always seems to ultimately overflow itself to address a larger picture that goes far beyond the problematic of the individual.

Ospina's most recent film, Un tigre de papel (A Paper Tiger) has been well-received initially by audiences and critics worldwide. After being released as



part of Documenta Kassel 2007 (Documenta 12), one of the main events in contemporary art held in Germany, it was recently awarded the 2007 National Documentary Prize by the Colombian Ministry of Culture, with the judges citing its “ability to move between falsity and truth” and its “incursion into the cultural, social, and political life of Colombia between the 1930s and the 1980s, reflecting in an imaginative way the disillusionments and defeats of a whole generation,” as well as an ironic tone which “reinforces the author’s sarcastic point of view, based on editing strategies that make the film a virtuous audiovisual collage, in which memory ends up becoming a poetic truth.”¹³

As with several films made by Ospina in recent years, this documentary takes advantage of the malleability provided by the use of video, a much less expensive medium which allows for hundreds of hours of filming with a simple portable camera, which can then be easily and creatively edited without the large costs and limitations characteristic of filmmaking in the past.¹⁴ Un tigre also continues employing the tactics and strategies for exhibition and distribution used by Ospina and Mayolo early in their careers: a hybrid strategy that takes advantage of both the commercial as well as other types of venues such as universities, festivals, and film clubs, at the local, national, and international level. To date, the film has been screened in commercial and art-house theaters, film clubs, universities, and festivals in several cities in Colombia, the United States, Spain, Chile, and Mexico, among others. Creating an audience while competing with Hollywood films in order to sustain the film in commercial theaters continues to be a challenge. In order to confront it, Ospina and his associates have needed to resort to creative tactics for attracting the public. Waging publicity stunts and unfolding an initial disinformation campaign on the Internet announcing imminent legal action against the film due to copyright violations of the work of the artist Pedro Manrique Figueroa are just a couple of these tactics, which have been complemented by Ospina’s active distribution through film festivals and accepting invitations to present the film throughout the country and the world.

Offering itself as a fake documentary, some critics have seen in Un tigre de papel echoes of such films as Woody Allen’s Zelig, *Forgotten Silver* by Costa Botes and Peter Jackson, La era del ñandú by Carlos Sorín, or This Is Spinal Tap by Rob Reiner. However, Un tigre could be equally related to Brazilian films which “imitate the montage film with an intention of pure fabrication” and that explore “the limits between fiction and documentary and the genres’ blind spots. Examples of such films could be Triste trópico (Arthur Omar, 1973), “an invention inspired by the ties and clichés of the biographies of illustrious men,”

¹³ The verdict is available at <<http://www.mincultura.gov.co/eContent/library/documents/DocNewsNo1210DocumentNo1566.PDF>>

¹⁴ Ospina reportedly edited and assembled 150 hours of recorded materials and 15 hours of archive materials in more than 700 hours.



or Nós que aquí estamos por vós esperamos (Marcelo Masagão, 1999), “an imaginary biography of the 20th century, devoid of its events, in favor of the disquisitions suggested by the images [...] submitted to the logic of an unpredictable subject” (Paranaguá, “Orígenes” 64-5).

In effect, following the conventions of the biopic, the film resorts to different types of sources and mechanisms coming from a multiplicity of spatiotemporal locations— a fairly strict chronological structure organized by periods, testimonies from authorities from the 1960s-70s Colombian cultural arena and some international experts or connections, introduction of complementary visual archive materials and reconstructions—to add credibility to its fake truth: a biographical sketch of the brilliant and enigmatic artist Pedro Manrique Figueroa, the alleged pioneer of collage in Colombia, who has gone missing since 1981.¹⁵ Through a series of introductory sequences that Chilean documentary-maker Patricio Guzmán appraised as “a luminous opera, or rather a zarzuela about a mad country” (“Un tigre”), Ospina does not delay his communicating to audiences an intention to sketch a biography of the artist. For instance, he connects Manrique Figueroa’s place and date of birth (Choachí, Colombia, 1934) with events that would ultimately define the history of the 20th century: the killing of King Alexander I from Yugoslavia, the launch of Mao’s Great March, or Stalin’s interpellation to the First Congress of Soviet Writers.

As Ospina puts it plainly, his objective is “to create a convincing story through the use of credible documentary techniques” (“Apuntes” 99). Nevertheless, like the most elaborate fake documentaries, Un tigre leaves clues along the way (e.g., the accumulation of coincidences and exaggerations, or the evidently falsified nature of some of its images and testimonials) which put it in evidence. The fake is definitely not a new genre, and Ospina’s film is just an example of what Sicinski means when he comments on the current ubiquitous nature of these types of films. However, like the latter also states, the fake might well be the only new cinematographic genre to have appeared in the last forty years. In accordance with the principles of this genre, Ospina’s film questions the supposed objectivity and transparency of audiovisual discourse, as well as the great existing potential for manipulation of the truth, a potential frequently abused by mass media and documentary films. Through this questioning, the film demands from the audience a deeper level of hermeneutic interaction. This might not be a novel contribution to the genre, but it does not imply that the film lacks additional merits. When Elena Oroz examines the film, for instance, she cites its thorough research and rescue of archive materials (such as the delightful and delirious fragment of propaganda for the Cuban regime from the earliest moments of the Revolution, predating even the formation of the ICAIC), the “expressive and metaphoric use of montage” (in which there is an evident influence of Vertov and Santiago Álvarez’s *agit prop*) exemplified in the

¹⁵ The film is based on an idea by artists Lucas Ospina, François Bucher, and Bernardo Ortiz, with the assistance of writer Carolina Sanín.



presumed *found footage* of the only known short film produced by Manrique Figueroa, El bombardeo de Washington,¹⁶ and the film's adoption of elements pertaining to the rhetoric of collage such as irony, parody, and kitsch (Oroz).

Some critics have rejected classification of Un tigre among examples of the fake documentary genre, arguing instead that it is a documentary in the strict sense of the term, even though not one about the proposed subject, the artist Pedro Manrique Figueroa. Because what Ospina's film ends up doing, notwithstanding its initial claim, is opening up an opportunity to retell and re-imagine a crucial period of modern Colombian history, from the undeclared civil war that began around the 1940s to the guerrilla wars and the first emergence in the 1970s of what would later become the powerful drug cartels. But this, as Sicinski claims, is precisely what real fake docs are about: generating alternative histories which are speculative and productive in relation to specific intellectual goals, i.e., "films that lie in order to tell the truth." When the experts who claim to have met Manrique Figueroa add little fragments of their own personal memory to the portrait of the evanescent artist, they collectively recompose and reevaluate a portrait of a generation which was originally drawn along the ideological, party-based lines of a world starting to drown under the freezing waters of the Cold War. As the collective imagination (re)creates the artist in the film, his presence acts upon the "actors" who imagine him, infecting them with his own humorous and irreverent "truth." In this manner, the witnesses/protagonists willingly accept a new retrospective vision which demands from them the removal of the lens through which those historical periods have historically been seen. As with Manrique Figueroa's collages, the new image produced is capable of poking fun at both the political right and left ideologies, exhuming through that humor what comes across to contemporary audiences as a truer, clearer picture of the times.¹⁷ Also reflecting Manrique Figueroa's work, Un tigre works as a collage itself, letting art and politics, truth and lies, and documentary and fiction films face each other and interact. Art, culture, and lies are then transformed into the necessary pretexts to enter, with a smile and an open mind, the thorny realms of power, politics, and history. The mechanism was already present in Oiga, vea (in which the pretext was sports), but on this

¹⁶ This extremely brief montage film is in reality a premonitory experimental work created by Ospina in 1972. For Bernal (22), it is a mini-film inspired by surrealist theory and Dziga Vertov which intends to create a fiction with documentary material, an illusion with found materials. The points of contact with the work of Manrique Figueroa are more than evident.

¹⁷ I base these observations on screenings of the film in the cities of Medellín (Colombia) and Pittsburgh (USA). In these instances, the veracity or falsity of the "facts" seemed to take centrality during the audience discussions following the film briefly and initially. Once the "ploy" was uncovered by perspicuous spectators with the aid of numerous clues dispersed throughout the film, discussion and conversation rapidly evolved toward deeper topics such as the collage structure, quality, and effect of the film, the role of text and image, etc. For the more gullible spectators, the recognition of being "put on" gave way to laughter, and a sense of some sort of complicity after which new things were possible. This seemed to confirm what Ospina states in his notes, i.e., how this documentary could resort to "lies to get to the truth."



occasion the degree to which it has been perfected by Ospina throughout his career is evidenced.

Despite the existence of several points of contact with Oiga, vea, the most direct predecessor for Un tigre de papel might well be Ospina and Mayolo's Agarrando pueblo, something acknowledged by Ospina ("Apuntes" 100). The elements connecting this chronologically-distant work with his newest film include obvious characteristics such as its parody of reality and the intertwining of fictional and documentary accounts. However, as it can be clear from what has been delineated throughout this essay, along the years Ospina has been distancing his work from and questioning the current relevance of the original principles of Third Cinema, unlike other documentary makers of his generation like Marta Rodríguez or Patricio Guzmán who have dedicated insurmountable efforts to keeping the utopia alive. Where he showed a preoccupation for marginal subjects and social or cultural collectives in the past he now seems to have turned his attention to examples of the "bourgeois" artist and conditions, while at the same time his films have become more nihilistic and pessimistic, characteristics which Solanas and Getino listed in their definitions of the auteur or vanguard cinema. Furthermore, his work in the director's chair has become itself more solitary. What used to be large collective work, both at the level of production and subjects, has given way to a concern for more individual figures. The sense of urgency has also disappeared, though this may be a sign of the times and is rather consequent with the severe retrospective critique performed upon that period by the most recent groups of young Colombian and Latin American filmmakers, as Juan Diego Caicedo makes it clear in his articles.

Since Un tigre is—in its own original way—drawing a critique of the utopian decades of the 1960s and 70s, it is not hard to imagine how it could equally be distancing itself from Agarrando pueblo as a predecessor. Therefore, it could be shedding a revealing light on the fate of short and documentary Third Cinema in Colombia and, by extension, Latin America. In Agarrando pueblo, as in the postulates of Third Cinema, truth is in theory a verifiable reality which lies behind the screen created by the oppressors, and it is the mission of shorts and documentaries to remove the veil, even if in order to accomplish this it must resort to the staging of falsity. Following this new reading, the truth that sprung from the victory of "the people" over the vampires of poverty in Agarrando pueblo did not exist "out there" properly. It was, more exactly, nothing more than an illusion generated by artistic and political manipulation.

In Un tigre, accordingly, truth as a solid and coherent entity does not exist anymore. Rather, it is a disconcerting disillusion—to play a pun on another of Ospina's works—or a dream always already over. As indicated by Lebow, the mimesis of mockumentary ends up revealing the impossibility of the ideal of the supposed "true reality" or the "documentary original" (232), and this is the case in Ospina's film. Truth is offered more as a collective construct which necessitates of a greater lie in order to unmask and reveal itself, not anymore as



a pure and messianic entity, but instead as a phantasm wrapped in rags, not too far from the aged, mute, and enigmatic mummy Ospina presents his audience with toward the end of the film. This is yet another objet trouvé among the pieces in store at the National Museum in Colombia, a corpse which some suspect might belong to Manrique Figueroa as an instance either of his work, his body, or both. In stark contrast to the truth revealed in Agarrando pueblo, this mummy is unable to speak and/or be recognized. Its fate is to remain forever a question, or to pass, in a best-case scenario, for a piece of art, incomprehensible and unclassifiable. Manrique Figueroa might have vanished or may never have existed, but that ceases to matter as the film progresses.

What does remain and exist, however, is his trace which, like a pebble dropped into the water, ripples outward and touches everything.

Some concluding notes on the state of short films and documentaries in Colombia

As a whole, Ospina's latest film provides us with an opportunity to look retrospectively at his body of short and documentary films and to gauge the degree to which the parameters of Third Cinema—which applied so profoundly to his early work—have been transformed in his case. This might, in turn, give us a fair idea of changes that have affected the cinematic landscape in Colombia and Latin America throughout the past three or four decades. The current landscape for Latin American filmmakers has been diagnosed as one in which fossilized film industries are hardly able to compete with Hollywood's hegemony, having also to fight for space with vigorous multinational television companies specializing in the production of soap operas. However, films are still being made, and high-quality documentary production is still considered one of the characteristics of Latin American cinema. This has been made possible especially thanks to co-productions (mostly with European institutions) and an increase in government funding, both of which have also meant a loss of control over what films are being made and how. Furthermore, the incorporation of digital video into the tools of the trade has enabled for a greater and more diverse access to filmmaking. Chanan sharply assessed the changing geography of Third Cinema when he stated that [t]he means for producing third cinema, third video, even third television, are much greater now than when the praxis first appeared; the political context, however, has been transformed. The original third cinema was premised on militant political movements of a kind which can hardly exist any longer, and upon ideologies which have taken a decisive historical beating. Third cinema can only survive if it recognises that it comes from the margins and the interstices" (386).

This may be precisely what Ospina's latest film has been able to achieve. Un tigre comes at a moment which is similar in many respects to the one experienced by Colombian Third Cinema shorts and documentaries in the 1970s. A new Film Law decreed by the Colombian Ministry of Culture has recently enabled an



increase in the production of these types of films, as well as feature-length ones. One still cannot speak at this point of a Colombian film industry, but film production is undergoing a period of bonanza, with fourteen films released in 2007 in contrast to 4.5 in the 1990s or eight between 2004 and 2006 (X. Ospina 4). However, there is a general atmosphere of caution vis-à-vis this bonanza due on the one hand to the previous experience accumulated by those who, like Ospina, were there in the 1970s to witness what happened with the Ley de sobreprecio. On the other hand, there is a concern with the possibility that the market has already reached a saturation point for these films, and that the existing conditions will not support the existence of a local audience large enough to make them profitable or able to compete against Hollywood and the new technologies which have multiplied the options for a growing privatization of audiovisual consumption.

The situation is even more critical for short and documentary films. In spite of the optimistic reception of works such as Ospina's latest film, and a general consensus on the consistent gains in terms of the technical and conceptual formation of the younger generation of filmmakers, and even though there has been a definite worldwide reemergence of the documentary genre after the impact and success of work by Michael Moore and others, traditionally there has not been in Colombia a wide theatrical audience for these types of films, which have often been deemed more appropriate for television audiences or for film festivals. An item in the Film Law specifies benefits for exhibitors showing Colombian shorts, but in a period of three years fewer than 50 shorts have reached the cinema screens. According to Figueroa, nearly half of these were produced by four producing companies (many of them often in association with the exhibitors), and they tend to privilege conventional or television-style narratives and aesthetics, and to portray the exotic fauna and flora of Latin America (74). When the predominant absence of a critical and reflexive stance in these shorts is added to the picture, it is hard not to fear a repetition of what happened during the days of Sobreprecio. The panorama of shorts and documentaries produced and exhibited within the Law is certainly not optimistic. However, examples of what is being made outside the Law, not just by Ospina but by several other filmmakers in Colombia, remains as an open promise, one that questions and defines the state of the genre, even if distant from the original principles of Third Cinema which not too long ago were the ones breathing life into Colombian cinema.



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A Chronology of Selected Short Films and Documentaries by L. Ospina and C. Mayolo

1969. Quinta de Bolívar. Dir. Carlos Mayolo. 35 mm, B/W, 6 min.
1971. Iglesia de San Ignacio. Dir. Carlos Mayolo. 35 mm, B/W, 6 min.
1971. Monserate. Dir. Carlos Mayolo and Jorge Silva. 35 mm., color, 8 min.
1971. Oiga, vea. Dir. Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo. 16 mm., B/W, 27 min.
1972. El bombardeo de Washington. Dir. Luis Ospina. 1 min.
1973. Angelita y Miguel Ángel. Dir. Carlos Mayolo and Andrés Caicedo. (unfinished).
1973. Calí de película. Dir. Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo. 35 mm, color, 14 min.
1978. Agarrando pueblo (Los vampiros de la miseria). Dir. Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo. 16 mm, color and B/W, 28 min.
1985. En busca de "María." Dir. Luis Ospina and Jorge Nieto. B/W & color, 15 min.
1986. Andrés Caicedo: unos pocos buenos amigos. Dir. Luis Ospina. Video, 86 min.
1987. Antonio Maria Valencia: música en cámara. Dir. Luis Ospina. B/W & color, video, 87 min.
1993. Nuestra película. Dir. Luis Ospina. Video, 96 min.
2003. La desazón suprema: retrato incesante de Fernando Vallejo. Dir. Luis Ospina. Color and B/W, video, 90 min.
2007. De la ilusión al desconcierto: cine colombiano 1970-1995. Dir. Luis Ospina. Fondo para el desarrollo cinematográfico & Fundación Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano. Series of chapters for TV, color, video, 25 min. each.
2007. Un tigre de papel. Dir. Luis Ospina. Color, video, 114 min.