

# WHAT IS POVERTY PORN?<sup>1</sup>

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Sometime during the first half of this decade while I was living in Colombia, there was a lengthy debate about the work of a young Colombian artist named Jaime Ávila, who had taken a series of erotic, fetishistic photographs of homeless men. They were shot in the style of fashion photography (with something like an American Apparel aesthetic) and meant to document the quirky personal styles of each of the artist's models (presumably to give them a sense of dignity). Each portrait was then exhibited as a diptych alongside images of urban decay lit up by tiny colored lights like the panoramic posters of cityscapes you might find in a tourist shop. Those who accused the work of being morally ambiguous or unethical used the term *pornomiseria*, which can be translated into English as "poverty porn." And in fact early last year, the term poverty porn was used by a British journalist to critique Danny Boyle's representation of street children in Mumbai in *Slumdog Millionaire*<sup>2</sup> but the term can also be traced back to online discussions revolving around the HBO television series "The Wire."<sup>3</sup> However this term managed to find its way into Anglo-American discussions about representations of poverty and underdevelopment, the original Spanish version originated in Colombia in the early 1970s and coincides with the beginnings of a national film industry. It wasn't until almost three decades later that the term would emerge in discussions about the visual arts. My presentation today will describe the historical origins of *pornomiseria* although ultimately I'm interested in recuperating this term in relation to contemporary discussions about Latin American art that I think *still* seem to uncomfortably oscillate between, on the one hand, an absolute denial of a social and political context (in favor of something like a homogenous globalized aesthetic) and on the other, an uncritical and even cynical desire for representations of social conflict and economic underdevelopment. The critique that underlines this historical investigation is about the failures of 90s multiculturalism and identity politics, which I'm personally very familiar with because I was in graduate school and beginning my career in New York City at that time. But my critique is also about the excesses of an art market constantly in search of new products and exotic geographic sites of production. And this I witnessed over and over again as a curator working in cities like Mexico and Bogotá and seeing to what extent art scenes outside of North America and Western Europe are still subject to the colonizing impulses that seem to be endemic to a desire for diversity originating in the Center.

In the summer of 1971 Luis Ospina was in Bogotá, Colombia on vacation from film school at UCLA. There he met with his friend Carlos Mayolo and together they decided to film the sixth Pan American Games that were about to take place in their hometown of Cali, Colombia. With a 16mm camera Mayolo had

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Miles, "Shocked by Slumdog's poverty porn," Times Online, January 14, 2009. (last accessed on May 3, 2010) [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest\\_contributors/article5511650.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article5511650.ece)

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Alexander Russo, "Is It Just Poverty Porn? Reconsidering 'The Wire,'" <http://scholasticadministrator.typepad.com/thisweekineducation/2008/01/the-bleakness-o.html> (last accessed May 3, 2010)

<sup>4</sup> Londoño died at age 53 from a condition that would have been treatable had he had the resources to seek proper medical attention. In his column "Sunset Boulevard," which he published under the pseudonym Norma Desmond, Ospina wrote: "Fifteen days after (his death), (in)competent authorities arrived (to his house) with an eviction order but Londoño, just like in the movie, expelled the vampires of poverty from the premises." *El Pueblo* (Semana Cultural), November 19, 1980, p.11. All Spanish citations are translated by me unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Alberto Navarro, "Entrevista con Carlos Mayolo," *Cinemateca*, no.5, August 1978, p.74.

borrowed without permission from the advertising agency where he worked, the two set off for Cali but arrived just in time to miss the opening ceremonies and to find that they would be excluded from all of the official venues without the proper permits. What began as a spontaneous exercise in simply going out to shoot footage of a very loaded political and historical event, the film, entitled *Oiga vea*, became a portrait of the thousands of others who had also been excluded: the majority of Cali's population, for whom admission fees were far beyond reach, and who experienced the events and festivities alongside the filmmakers from behind chain-linked fences or walls. While the first part of the film depicts what Ospina and Mayolo managed to film of the games (mostly images of the crowds on the street outside of those exclusive venues) in the second part of the film the location has moved from the centre of Cali to a shantytown called El Guabal. Here local residents talk about the hypocritical nature of an event that projected false images of economic progress and development to the rest of the world, in denial of the country's real conditions which form the visual backdrop of this dialogue. Particularly vocal is a man named Luis Alfonso Londoño who would eventually become a crucial collaborator and long-term friend of Mayolo and Ospina until his premature death nine years later.<sup>4</sup>

Years later Mayolo described his process of making documentary films as one that was fundamentally collective and that his experience of recording footage with Ospina in marginal neighborhoods was subject (and accountable) to the reactions of their most immediate and relevant public: the curious spectators who always gathered around to watch and comment on the filmmakers' attempt to represent their situation. Mayolo compared this spontaneous participation to having "150 assistant directors" whose presence influenced the film's structure and content much more than its anticipated reception by the cinema club or film festival publics that would eventually pay to see it.<sup>5</sup> *Oiga vea* quickly earned its place in Colombian film history as an icon of militant cinema that depicted poverty and exploitation in order to analyze the origins of social inequality and transform the structures that perpetuated it. However, a desire to produce critical consciousness through the transparency or visibility of marginality always brings with it the risk of producing the opposite effect: that of cynical indifference that comes from a saturation and fetishization of this visibility in the absence of proper analysis or even a basic code of ethics. In Colombia, the most significant cultural historical aspect of Mayolo and Ospina's legacy is the term they invented —*pornomiseria*— to articulate a problem that became endemic to Colombian filmmaking in the 1970s, but that continues to haunt any discussion about the representation of a socioeconomic Other.

The history of Colombian film is characterized by a series of frustrated beginnings and it's not until around 1960 that there is anything remotely resembling a national film industry. Most accounts agree that José María Arzuaga's feature-length narrative film *Pasado el meridiano* (1967) represented the first significant step towards consolidating a properly national film-movement. Arzuaga was a Spanish filmmaker influenced by Italian neo-realism who spent most of his adult life toiling away in advertising companies to fund the production of his work. The protagonist of his film is an assistant at an advertising agency who confronts a series of obstacles in his journey to his hometown to bury his mother. The character is both autobiographical and representative of an emblematic marginal, anti-hero victim to a ridiculously hostile environment. This honest representation of what was seen to be a very typical Colombian protagonist of working-class origins was celebrated by a film-club public but rejected by the censorship board that would ultimately prohibit its circulation in commercial cinemas.

Among the film's most enthusiastic supporters was Carlos Álvarez, a film critic who eventually began making documentary films in an attempt to implement and disseminate Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's theory of a Third Cinema in Colombia. In their 1971 manifesto *Cinema, Culture and Decolonization*, Solanas and Getino proposed the model of Third Cinema as part of a larger project of cultural decolonization, and as an alternative to what they called First Cinema (which was Hollywood) and Second Cinema (Auteur Cinema).<sup>6</sup> This was also the decade of New Latin American Cinema, with progressive politicized film movements in Brazil and Cuba, and also Argentina and Peru. Each scene had its own national traits but all contributed in one way or another to a critique of U.S. cultural hegemony and to 1960's revolutionary politics, which in a Latin American context had found its ultimate expression in the Cuban Revolution. In the last years of that decade, Álvarez attended several of the most important film festivals for militant film including Viña del Mar in 1967 and Mérida in 1968. In Mérida, Colombia enjoyed its first significant showing, most notably Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva's screening of a work in progress titled *Chircales* (1966–72), a rigorous anthropological investigation of a family of brick-makers on the outskirts of Bogotá that would continue for many years after to serve as one of the best examples of how to make film in Colombia. According to Carlos Mayolo and critic Ramiro Arbeláez, "*Chircales* is, within Colombian cinema, the most forceful condemnation of the conditions of underdevelopment and the socioeconomic and ideological mechanisms of exploitation and dependence."<sup>7</sup>

Like many other filmmakers of their generation, Rodríguez and Silva considered film to be an effective medium for pursuing grassroots political

<sup>6</sup> See Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino, *Cine, cultura, y descolonización*, México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1978 [reprint].  
<sup>7</sup> Ramiro Arbeláez and Carlos Mayolo, "Chircales," *Ojo al cine*, no.1, 1974, p.50.

<sup>8</sup> The Cuban Institute for Cinematographic Arts and Industry was founded in 1959, shortly after the Cuban Revolution, and produced films by seminal figures like Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (such as *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, or *Memories of Underdevelopment*, 1968) and Julio García Espinosa, but also produced works by film-makers from other parts of Latin America, most notably Patricio Guzmán's *The Battle of Chile* (1977–78).

activism in a country in which a colonial economic structure was still firmly in place. Before studying ethnology and film in Paris where she worked with Jean Rouch among others, Rodríguez had come into contact with families of brick-makers while doing social work with her good friend and mentor Camilo Torres—a Catholic priest and founder of the Sociology Department at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, who eventually gave up his academic career to join the rebel ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) and was killed shortly thereafter in combat. Along with her husband and long-time collaborator Jorge Silva, Rodríguez began conducting interviews with the families on the outskirts of Bogotá, and was confronted by a level of conflict and exploitation that, she later claimed, virtually negated all the theory she'd brought back from Europe. Many hours of audio recordings were made before the couple began to film, so that the resulting footage shows a remarkable level of intimacy and trust achieved through a year of cohabitation and five years of methodical research.

In the absence of screening venues for anything other than the insipid, mainstream commercial movies imported primarily from the United States and Mexico, a significant part of a filmmaker's job in Colombia was to guarantee adequate distribution for one's work, particularly when this work formed part of a larger political project. During the late '60s and early '70s film clubs began appearing all over the country and although these clubs catered to a public eager to see independent film, Rodríguez and Silva were sometimes disillusioned with the elitism they encountered, as discussions often focused more on aesthetics than politics. Also without effective state intervention towards the consolidation of a national film industry [like the ICAIC in Cuba, for example<sup>8</sup>] it was virtually impossible for independent filmmakers to recuperate the money they'd invested in their films, much less imagine making a living from them. Following the Cuban Revolution and the success of films like Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* in 1964, film festivals (primarily in Europe) began to demonstrate an interest in Latin American cinema and became both a viable option for showing work to a critical and receptive international audience, as well as an economic means to continue working independently. Rodríguez and Silva participated in festivals in Leipzig in 1972, Oberhausen in 1973 and Mexico in 1976, and eventually sold the rights to distribute *Chircales* to public television networks in Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland and Germany.

Although by the early 1970s Colombia represented one of the largest markets for film in Latin America (after Mexico and Brazil), it was the only country in Latin America that had not yet implemented protectionist legislation to enable the development of a national film industry. Under growing pressure from various professional sectors, in 1972 the Colombian state passed a

resolution that permitted an increase in the price of movie tickets with a surcharge (in Spanish: *sobrecargo*) that would finance the local production of short 35mm, color films that would be screened in every major commercial theatre prior to the feature film. The results were astounding. By 1974 the number of short films had reached 79, which was almost double the total number produced in Colombia during the previous seven decades (1906–70).<sup>9</sup> However what soon became evident was that this dramatic increase in numbers reflected opportunism more than sincere enthusiasm, because for the first time in Colombian history it became possible not only to recuperate the money invested in a film, but to actually profit from it.

From this point on there is a new genre of filmmaking referred to throughout the primary sources as “*el cine de sobrecargo*” (surcharge film), which includes approximately 600 short films produced between 1970 and 1980 that instead of helping to create a viable industry earned that straggling industry a lamentable reputation among Colombian spectators. It’s difficult to generalize about the character of these films, because there were so many of them and because directors ranged from dilettantes motivated by easy money to people like Mayolo and Ospina or Arzuaga who were grateful for the opportunity to work in 35mm color film. To many critics and filmmakers, this legislation was essentially flawed because it included the establishment of a Committee for Quality Control that rated each film according to its alleged quality, but which often functioned as a covert system of censorship in order to weed out films of political content. Among the most famous cases of censorship was that of Mayolo and Ospina’s *Asunción* (1975). This film was about a domestic employee who is constantly nagged by her very annoying employer until one day, while the family she works for is on vacation, she gets fed up, throws a party with copious amounts of alcohol and salsa music (at that time still exclusively the music of the working class), and abandons the house in a state of utter disarray. In an interview some years later Ospina said that it was their intention to create paranoia, as “domestic employees represent a class enemy under the very same roof.”<sup>10</sup>

However, Alberto Aguirre, one of the most vehement critics of surcharge cinema, has identified two major tendencies within this massive group of films. The first group produced a series of picturesque films that pandered to excruciatingly trite forms of nationalism: “with the motto ‘Colombia is magnificent,’ [it is] tourist cinema that is insipid and manipulative.”<sup>11</sup> But more disturbing were those works that represented the exact opposite impulse, which Mayolo and Rodríguez termed “pseudo-denunciation.”<sup>12</sup> The worst examples were documentaries that consisted of previously recorded footage of subjects—ranging from poor families to street children, prostitutes, drug addicts or the

<sup>9</sup> These statistics are taken from *Cuadernos de cine*, no.1, March–April 1975, p.17 and Carlos Álvarez, “Una década de cortometraje colombiano, 1970–80,” *Borradores de Cine*, no.1, 1982, p.40.  
<sup>10</sup> Alberto Navarro, “Entrevista con Luis Ospina,” *Cinemateca*, no.1, 1977, p.24.  
<sup>11</sup> Alberto Aguirre, “El Festival de Cine Colombiano: Radiografía veraz de un cine embrionario y pobre,” *Cuadro*, no.3, 1977, p.11.  
<sup>12</sup> “El De\$precio del \$obrecargo,” *Ojo al cine*, no.2, 1975, p.9.

<sup>13</sup> Carlos Mayolo, *La vida de mi cine y mi televisión*, Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 2008, p.67.  
<sup>14</sup> A. Aguirre, “El Festival de Cine Colombiano”, *op. cit.*, p.13.

mentally ill—hastily put together with an authoritative voice-over that described the social mechanisms responsible for these social problems in very superficial terms. Without in-depth analysis or any real relationship to what was being filmed, “surcharge film” was guilty of the worst kind of exploitation.

Many years later Mayolo described this era in the following manner: “Latin America had become the best place for poverty. Obviously the cinema of this era was unable to hide it, nor could it refuse to recognize it. Poverty became *the* theme. Everyone began grabbing a camera to film the defects, the deformations, the diseases and scars of an unequal and impoverished Latin America. [...] They descended on the poor with their cameras, believing that with the simple act of filming, they were making a document about reality.”<sup>13</sup> In a similar tone, Aguirre wrote: “For lack of political rigor, *miserabilismo* is common in [surcharge] film that attempts to be critical. Poverty is morbidly displayed and discussed at length in order to provoke commiseration in a gesture similar to that which moves the bourgeoisie to pursue charitable acts.”<sup>14</sup> In the 1960s the pioneers of Cinema Novo (Glauber Rocha among them) had called for a faithful cinematic representation of the country’s social problems as a form of resistance to both the lies of Hollywood and those of a military dictatorship eager to promote a positive image of Brazil abroad. But by the 1970s things had changed. By then, *miserabilismo* (the representation of the poverty and violence of underdevelopment) had become an industry in its own right, and acquired a negative connotation among its critics because of the spectacular and consumable character of the images that passively reflected the estrangement that existed among social classes in Colombia (and throughout Latin America). The success of those few examples of “surcharge cinema” that have survived can be attributed to the way in which images of marginality represented freedom from or resistance to the rigid social norms of a hierarchical, conservative society. I would go further and argue that these films also participated in the romanticizing of a socio-economic Other, with whom the filmmaker and public might falsely and pretentiously identify, following a vulgar us-versus-them anti-imperialist logic.

One such film, attacked by some film critics while praised by others, was Ciro Durán’s *Gamín* (*Waif*, 1978), a feature-length documentary about street children in Bogotá that was very well received in Europe and won awards at festivals in Leipzig, Bilbao and Huelva. The film documented a group of homeless children from a very young age happily frolicking in the streets—to an adolescence marked by petty crime that promised more hardened criminal behavior to come. The explanation offered was typical and went something like this: these children had left home to escape domestic violence and this abuse was the result of the desperation felt by their parents, typically farmers who

had been displaced by the armed conflict to a hostile new urban environment. Luis Ospina happened to attend the Cannes Film Festival the year *Gamín* was presented, in what was the first Colombian representation ever at Cannes, and wrote: “Aside from drugs and coffee, our country is known abroad for its capital’s *gamines*. Articles and documentaries on this phenomenon abound on European television and in newspapers. [...] Here in France, the [Communist] Party has even come out with a comic strip about *gamines*, ‘Les petits enfants de la misère’. In the German magazine *Die Stern*, there was an article about *gamines* called ‘Die Kleine Banditen von Bogotá’ (Bogotá’s Young Bandits).”<sup>15</sup> That year Ospina maintained an intense correspondence with Mayolo from Paris, where he was editing the final version of *Agarrando pueblo* (*The Vampires of Poverty*, 1978), a fictional documentary he and Mayolo had filmed the previous year.<sup>16</sup> Ospina and Mayolo hoped this film would have enough of an impact to put an end to all of those gratuitous images of poverty that had come to dominate mediocre films not only in Colombia but throughout the Third World.

In an unpublished text titled “Que es la porno-miseria?” (What Is Poverty Porn?), written in preparation for the film’s premiere in Paris in 1978, Mayolo and Ospina described the sad evolution that had taken place from politically committed independent film to “a certain type of documentary that superficially appropriated the achievements and methodologies of independent film to the point of deformation. In this way poverty became a shocking theme and a product easily sold, especially abroad, where it is the counterpart to the opulence of consumption.”<sup>17</sup> Filmed in Cali and Bogotá, *Agarrando pueblo* follows an unscrupulous film director named Alfredo García, played by Mayolo himself, as he and his cameraman move around both cities looking for unwilling subjects for a documentary commissioned by German television. The 16mm film alternates between color frames of footage shot by the directors and black-and-white images depicting the process of filming and everything that takes place off-camera. Beggars, abandoned infants, street performers and any mildly underprivileged-looking individual are fair game as the crew fulfils its quotas of poverty. And in fact, during much of the film the nature of the relationship between the real filmmakers and the subjects exploited by the fictional ones remains unclear, so that an already tenuous line between documentary and fiction begins to blur.

In Bogotá, the film crew descends upon La Rebeca, a well-known fountain in the city center that after years of neglect had become a popular swimming spot for *gamines*. As the character of García coaches the children with the promise of a few coins, an angry man delivers what seems to be a scripted speech about the exploitation he’s witnessing. In reality, however, this man was actually just a casual spectator who was angered by what he saw, and made

<sup>15</sup> Luis Ospina, *Palabras al viento: Mis sobras completas*, Bogotá: Editora Aguilar, 2007, pp.149–50 and 340.

<sup>16</sup> This is the official English translation of the title. In France it was called *Les Vampires de la Misère*. Ospina wrote, “In order to have some distance, I edited *Agarrando pueblo* in Paris where, thanks to the generosity of Denise de Casabianca and the enigmatic Chris Marker (who I never actually met), I was able to finish the movie.” *Ibid.*, p.36.

<sup>17</sup> This unpublished document (written in Spanish) turned up recently in the archives of Luis Ospina.

<sup>18</sup> This anecdote was revealed by Mayolo in an interview.

Apparently the angry man had threatened to stab him, leading to a confrontation that ended, finally, in this collaboration. See “Entrevista con Carlos Mayolo,” *op. cit.*, pp.73–74.

<sup>19</sup> This phrase is difficult to translate into English but means something like “to grab or seize the people,” but in an aggressive and potentially exploitative manner. According to Ospina, “*Agarrando pueblo*” is a popular term from the Valle del Cauca Department (of which Cali is the capital), which means “to trick or manipulate the people.” He cites the example of a snake charmer who gathers together a group of curious spectators with his show. Harold Alvarado and Hernán Toro, “Con Luis Ospina Agarrando Pueblo desde París,” *El Pueblo* (Semanario Cultural), June 11, 1978. In “Entrevista con Carlos Mayolo,” *op. cit.*, p.73, Mayolo describes how the term came to acquire a negative connotation in relation to activities perceived to be exploitative, for example anthropology or sociology students conducting field research in marginal neighborhoods but failing to return upon completion of their projects or foreigners taking pictures. “There was always a violent reaction against those individuals who attempted to invade these spaces without asking for permission or collaboration.”

violent threats (off camera) against Mayolo’s character.<sup>18</sup> Ospina describes this scene as a *happening*—the filmmakers placed two agitators among the group of onlookers who had gathered around the film crew with the hope of soliciting exactly this kind of reaction. In the next scene García is now in a hotel room and has just gotten out of the shower. Half naked, he negotiates a scene that will be filmed later on that day with Ramiro Arbelaéz, who plays himself and whose role will be to interview a destitute couple in order to provide a theoretical explanation that mimics the voice-overs used in so many “surcharge films.” The actors who play the couple soon appear with the film’s producer (a preppy but sleazy entrepreneur) to try on their torn, dirty costumes. The crew then sets off—but only after García takes a minute to do a few lines of cocaine in the bathroom. (This detail was based on real life, as Mayolo was well known for—and unapologetic about—his drug use.)

Now in Cali, the film crew finds its way back to El Guabal, the very same neighborhood that had appeared six years earlier in *Oiga vea*, the work that initiated Mayolo and Ospina’s participation in this chapter of Colombian film history. And it’s appropriate that they’ve returned to this very same spot to provide a dignified sense of closure to a decade in which all of those ideals—specific to a particular historical moment now past but also, perhaps, the product of youth—had become corrupted and distorted beyond recognition.

The crew begins to film in front of a decrepit wooden house selected without any consideration for the person who might actually live here, when a recognizable figure appears: it is their old friend Luis Alfonso Londoño playing a furious and exaggerated (a bit too scruffy, a little too crazy) version of himself. He quickly jumps in front of the camera and yells “*Ah, con que agarrando pueblo, no?*”—the very same words he had used years before while Mayolo and Ospina were filming *Oiga vea*.<sup>19</sup> Londoño then proceeds to argue with the film’s producer, and refuses a bribe offered to him by pulling down his pants and wiping himself with the bills. He then disappears into his house, storms out with a machete (an object heavily associated in Colombia with class conflict and bourgeois fear) and chases the crew and actors from his property. Finally, he spots a film canister on the ground abandoned in the commotion, and laughs perversely as he opens it up, pulls the film out, exposing and destroying its contents while doing a mad dance and draping himself in dozens of feet of film. The scene ends when Londoño abruptly freezes in a perfectly photogenic pose, looks to the side and asks someone off-camera, “Was that okay?”

Amidst all the commotion that predictably erupted after the release of this film, one critic thoughtfully wrote, “Ospina and Mayolo have succeeded in a straightforward and forceful critique, so well executed that in the darkness of the theatre one feels guilty to have participated as a spectator of all those

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works they indict.”<sup>20</sup> But others complained that, despite the effectiveness of its negative critique that “would put an end to what had been a damaging genre for a national cinema and industry,” *Agarrando pueblo* failed to offer a productive alternative for the development of that industry and, worse yet, threatened to stigmatize any future attempts at cinematic social critique.<sup>21</sup> Mayolo responded by arguing that while images of poverty had been justifiable within militant cinema, the commodification of poverty had made these images redundant to a public whose consumption of them was characterized by a sado-masochistic pleasure, or even indifference. Also problematic had been a tendency within certain instances of militant cinema itself to import models of critique from other Latin American countries (especially Argentina and Cuba) without adapting them to the specificities of a local context. Just as the best examples of militant cinema had attempted to critique economic exploitation from the position of those exploited, *Agarrando pueblo* intended to measure the reactions of the personalities behind those clichéd representations of *pornomiseria* in a work that questioned the very distinction between documentary and fiction.<sup>22</sup>

If this film succeeded in denouncing the accumulation of obscene images of poverty and underdevelopment that had proliferated in cinema for almost a decade, it also broke with the assumption that social critique would necessarily find its most appropriate form in the genre of documentary filmmaking by implying that even the most well-intentioned attempts to faithfully represent a social problem are always already mediated. If *Agarrando pueblo* succeeded in contributing to the imminent collapse of the surcharge industry, it also provided a positive impulse to the development of fictional cinema in Colombia. In subsequent works by Ospina and Mayolo (produced individually rather than collaboratively) social injustice was represented via fictional characters such as sanguine landowners or their incestuous offspring and the image of the vampire became a constant—an idea that resembled Osvaldo de Andrade’s notion of anthropofagy (cannibalism) but in an inverted and negative form.<sup>23</sup> Most surcharge films were eventually banished to the archives of the national cinematheque, where the film stock slowly deteriorated as historical amnesia about this decade of Colombia film gradually set in. What did survive this history, however, was the idea of *pornomiseria* as a useful critical category, because as long as the structures that produce and, in turn, consume the obscenity of poverty remain in place, there will be ample opportunities for its exploitation. ●

<sup>20</sup> Alberto Vides, ‘Agarrando premio’, *Diario del Caribe* [Suplemento], June 18, 1978, p.6.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Jurado, ‘Agarrando pueblo y Cuartito azul’, *Cuadro*, no.6, 1978, pp.2–3.

<sup>22</sup> The last scene of *Agarrando pueblo* is an informal interview conducted by the filmmakers with Londoño.

<sup>23</sup> According to Haroldo de Campos: “*Antropofagia* is the idea of the critical swallowing up of the universal cultural heritage, elaborated not from the submissive, reconciliant perspective of the ‘good savage’ but from the disillusioned viewpoint of the ‘bad savage,’ the white-man eater, the cannibal.” Cited in Catherine David, “The Great Labyrinth,” *Hélio Oiticica* (exh. cat.), Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1992, p.252. While de Andrade’s idea of anthropofagy sought to resist and transform a situation of cultural dependence, Mayolo and Ospina used images of cannibalism to represent the structures of exploitation that determine social relations in Colombia.

## DIAS & RIEDWEG

Our comprehension of ourselves as artists is coupled with our self-identification as members of the general public—as part of the many functions and mechanisms of the public arena. We also see our main responsibility as contemporary artists as a need to question perception (including our own) about the mechanisms that affect and give form to public space. Rather than changing things directly, we encounter people and situations, always trying through different scenarios to question and review the perception of context and situation.

Encounters take the form of *sensorial workshops* or *staged encounters*, which allow us to meet different people in different contexts, and develop a dialogue that focuses on issues that position a particular group of people within society in general. We try to design concepts that allow this focus of debate to expand, through the use of the moving image, into the general public.

Our work is very much process (and therefore performance) oriented, but it also achieves a level of representation, which most often consists of video installation. However, these scenarios are not meant to be a final “product” or “result”, but rather, a further step in which the dialogical form of art that we seek to develop is taken from the initial audience to a broader sphere of resonance: the general public. Video installations are often shown in exhibitions to further communicate the subject matter of each project to anonymous individuals.

Human beings are interested in that what is not ours —what we are not, what we do not have or know firsthand. We don’t even know what we want, and yet, we want it. We are all interested in the other because it is through the other that we can mirror and reflect ourselves; the proverbial other is always very close—the very point at which we end.

Our artistic practice and daily life have been divided these past sixteen years. It unfolds in the area between the unknown territories of desire and fear—a world to be navigated. Perhaps this is why we are equally interested in documentary and fiction. Every image, in its origin, does not belong to the territory of documentary or fiction. What makes it belong to one or another territory is derived from the literature we create to support it. Any image can contain literary information, which constructs a message. An image is independent to any truth, lies, reality and representation. It must be so to be intelligible—to exist. Therefore, there is no necessity or possibility to really prove the distinction between the territories of fiction and documentary. All images are inter-territorial.

And it is precisely in this inter-territoriality—in this indefinite but existent arena—where it becomes possible to create an erotic/poetic field in which action and representation, as well as interaction and intervention, are mixed,