

## What Is Pornomiseria?

### Miquel Martí Freixas, Ángela Bonadies and Luis Ospina

A term coined in the 1970s by two members of the Colombian Grupo de Cali, while shooting their epic documentary “Agarrando Pueblo” (The Vampires of Poverty) has lost none of its currency.



Filming *Agarrando Pueblo* (The Vampires of Poverty), 1977  
From left to right: Luis Ospina, Fernando Vélez and Carlos Mayolo  
Photo by Eduardo Carvajal



Rehearsal of *Agarrando Pueblo* (The Vampires of Poverty), 1977  
From left to right: Fernando Vélez, Carlos Mayolo and Luis Alfonso Londoño  
Photo by Eduardo Carvajal

## ***Agarrando Pueblo* revisited by Miquel Martí Freixas**

### **Yesterday's Vampires of Poverty**

If someone were to ask me for an all-time top ten of the best documentary films ever made, I'd include, without a doubt, the small and not well-known Colombian film *Agarrando Pueblo*, made in 1977 by Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo. It may seem surprising at first to place this film next to the pillars that established documentary film as a genre (*Man with a Movie Camera* by Vertov in 1929 and *Nanook of the North* by Robert J. Flaherty in 1922), and close to the prominent names of those who forged a path for themselves within this form (Joris Ivens, Jean Rouch and Chris Marker, among many others). However, this small and modest Colombian film accomplished something that had not been undertaken before—a critical insight into the task of a cinematography that expands into an international context. This reflection is still very relevant forty years later. Ospina and Mayolo, perhaps even without knowing it, reach the core of one of the most important issues regarding the representation of others: the problem of ethics.

The film surfaced out of an emerging artist collective based in the city of Cali. Three names of the collective's members were put forward: Andrés Caidedo (1951–77), a writer, theatre actor and film critic who committed suicide at the age of twenty-five; and film directors Mayolo (1945–2007) and Ospina (1949). The latter, with a long trajectory in the genre of documentary film, narrates a world history from the small universe of Cali. Ospina's critical, humorous and imaginative perspective incorporates his commitment to honouring the creative legacy of the artist collective. His latest movie released in 2015, *Todo comenzó por el fin* (It All Started at the End), is in fact a feature-length film of over three hours wherein the director compiles the experiences of the Grupo de Cali, (as the collective is known), using film fragments, private recordings and statements from its living members. The background of the collective is made apparent with this movie, its inner workings, the input and presence of so many women participants, the fraternity, love, passion and joy they lived for decades. Primarily, the Grupo de Cali grew out of a cinema club. Even though other genres were common to the artistic production of the collective, film was their artistic backbone.

One attribute sets them apart from other artist collectives in Latin America—their distance from the militancy of the far right, whose reign prevailed in the rest of the continent, bringing forth fascist dictatorships and working-class repression and struggle. More concretely, documentary filmmaking served as a cultural expression of resistance in countries like Argentina and Chile. Contrary to this tendency, the Grupo de Cali was influenced by North American counterculture with rock music, underground references and protest movements all blended together with the local culture of Cali. Colombia did not suffer an armed takeover during those decades and in this sense, such forms of repression remained foreign to the country. However the Grupo de Cali did experience the bellicose vortex in Colombia towards the end of the sixties, which would later manifest as high daily doses of violence during the eighties and nineties, and a filthy, complex war between the government, guerrillas and

the paramilitary. Artists in Cali were affected by the aggressive climate, like all other citizens. They experienced this time in their artistic production, filmmaking, intense lives and drugs, all of which kept them alienated for years from the raw reality of their country.

Developed by Ospina and Mayolo, *Agarrando Pueblo* belongs to the early stages of the Grupo de Cali. The two directors were focused on staging a strong criticism of the filmmaking business in their country. At the time, national subsidies were available for the realisation of Colombian films for worldwide distribution; this aid provided fast funds for directors developing low production-value documentary films that dealt with the overarching theme of poverty. European buyers would easily acquire such films as they fitted into their clichés of a poor and underdeveloped Latin America while satisfying the demands of their art venues. Many unscrupulous filmmakers used misery in their own countries without questioning its conditions, making it banal for their own gain. This was the starting point of the title *Agarrando Pueblo*, a Colombian expression bestowed with a double meaning: it refers to both stealing from people and deceiving the masses.

With their critical will, the two friends wrote a film script placing themselves alongside disadvantaged populations, since a consideration of the extreme social inequality in Colombia was already one of the recurring themes in their work. In a mixture of documentary and mockumentary, Ospina and Mayolo played the role of two directors working on a film for a European production company. Using the project alias “Vampires of Misery” they would carelessly incorporate passers-by in the city of Cali as film actors for a ‘staged misery’. A misery that could be manipulated and exaggerated by virtue of their authority as directors. They drive fast, disregarding the inhabitants of the city. They sniff cocaine. Their film is full of great cinematic choices: the film's conclusion is its most remarkable aspect, with its narrative spins, denunciation, humour and punk attitude. The two directors give birth to the term *Pornomiseria*: “Misery was presented as one more spectacle for audiences to cleanse their dirty conscience, be moved, and pacify themselves. If misery had served its role as a tool for analysis and criticism within independent cinema, the mercantilist urge of the time transformed it in an escape valve of the system that instigated it in the first place.”

### **The Vampires of Poverty Today**

What makes *Agarrando Pueblo* astonishing is its relevance in 2018. Today one is still able to observe its unexpected validity. What began as a local critique is now a global matter, very much present in the daily movements of the Western world. What was born as a criticism of the unethical use of documentary film has exploded into television, advertising and photojournalism.

It would be demagogic to establish an ethics of documentary film on the basis of *Agarrando Pueblo*. It is extremely complex to dictate what is ethical and what isn't, an endless debate in certain cases. In the field of documentary film for instance, there have been great examples of ethical productions where a Western gaze is set

on formerly unknown lands, making these worlds comprehensible through the work. I will set forth two cases out of man: Jean Rouch, who collaborated with African protagonists to produce films of a highly collective character, and the French director Sylvain George's *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* (May They Rest in Revolt (Figures of War, 2010)), who spent four years travelling to Calais to develop an ethical affiliation with local immigrants, and sought a visual language that would separate him from the mainstream. George would deepen his relationship to observed conditions rather than stand at their shore. He would tell me in an interview, and I won't forget his words: "Who am I to film the misery of others? [...] Why shouldn't I film my own misery instead?" He wanted to engage in the most ethical approaches possible, knowing full well that not all means are suitable to reach the desired ends.

If we look at today's largest documentary film festivals we discover a great number of works per year dealing with similar topics (inequality, poverty, social conflict), all set in African, Asian and Latin American locations. Frequently, it is Western filmmakers who produce these documentaries. If said projects lack an air of prior ethical consideration and a dedication to political thinking, it is because their directors haven't dedicated enough time to the very complex social realities of the regions they portray. Their films are bound to fall into clichés, which stand for a reality that remains unfamiliar to them. This is often the case, unfortunately, and although many of these projects stem from good intentions—seeking more than the visibility and recognition of film festivals—their contributions are certainly suspicious. Mayolo and Ospina's allegations remain valid in such cases, wanting to criticise productions that feed the film industry. Here photojournalism as a genre might stand close to documentary film. Many photographers have been accused of compromising their ethics for the sake of their aesthetic gaze; one of the most famous cases being Sebastião Salgado in the nineties. The largest annual awards for photojournalism tend to follow a similar path to documentary film awards, where hedonism often triumphs over truthfulness and ethics. Similarly with NGOs, which have developed their own small industry of the image, there is a tendency to present visual campaigns with questionable content.

In the case of television networks, the ethics of filming others is out of control. It is impossible to carve out a space for reflection on a delicate subject such as this in the business of television, in which images circulate at the speed of light, 365 days per year, 24 hours per day, with content that is multiplied via hundreds of television channels. In news reports, wars are condensed into a few images, which are unable to account for the events. Then comes the football news where the reporter smiles after the triumph of his local team. An Islamic terrorist attack is followed by a set of wonderful male chauvinist ads, immediately after which we are provided a fast countdown of the poorest nations worldwide. The constant clashes and saturation are such that we consider ourselves lucky to find a TV channel prioritising neutral information delivered by a professional team of reporters. We cannot aspire to informative reports and montage of impeccable ethical value, or hope that Africa may suddenly be portrayed beyond three limited themes. This would be asking the mass media to do the job of good independent filmmakers and committed photographers. Although ideal, this would certainly be utopian. Our TVs might explode as we scrutinise current media vis-à-vis the idiom of *Pornomiseria*.

What will take place during the coming years, in terms of an ethical representation of the least favoured people, remains a mystery. We live in an audiovisual era of great speed, of unstoppable image proliferation and an excess of imagery. It becomes progressively more difficult to follow strict and rigorous ethics as images melt into themselves and collide. It will be the duty of the spectator to find filmmakers producing coherent works that are faithful to the world surrounding them, but these figures keep falling deeper into obscure niches. At the same time, it is also possible that in light of the major socio-economic changes taking place, for example in Africa, such societies will come to represent themselves more, gain visibility, voice and empowerment, and create new cultural and artistic expressions without the need to be seen through the eyes of others.

Next pages: Frames from the film *Agarrando Pueblo* (The Vampires of Poverty), 1977