

◆ 4

**And Medellín Exits the Closet: Postmodern Urban Stories**

*Eduardo Caro Meléndez*  
*Phoenix Country Day School*

La violencia se nutre de la marginalidad urbana, [la] gran ciudad se va colmando de oferta de drogas y los índices de violencia cotidiana parecen aumentar. . . [con] la crisis económica y su consiguiente costo social, con la acumulación de problemas urbanos no resueltos . . .  
-Martín Hopenhayn

(Violence nourishes itself on urban marginality, the great city fills with drug offers and the instances of daily violence seems to increase . . . [with] the economic crisis and its resulting social cost, with the accumulation of unresolved urban problems . . .)

Medellín, known as the city of eternal spring or the valley of Aburrá, capital of the department of Antioquia, is considered to be, after Bogotá, the second largest city in Colombia, with about three million inhabitants, making it the hundredth most populous urban area in the world. Historically, within Colombia, it has also been referred to as one of the most (perhaps the most) prosperous cities, which had been, for the most part, the result of the industrial development, particularly the clothing industry. However, it is widely known that, during the eighties and nineties, Medellín, in particular, and the whole region of Antioquia, in general, reactivated and burst their economy as a result of the illegal trafficking of drugs under the famous

Medellín Cartel that was once led by now deceased Pablo Escobar, who became one of the most wanted and one of the richest men in the world.

This illegal business and, as a result, unprecedented economic rise, brought about a whole range of social, economic, cultural, and political problems that, in one way or another, regardless of whatever sociopolitical efforts have been made, still persist in the so-called postmodern Medellín. Nonetheless, at present, the economy of the *paisa* society is reputed as one of the largest of Colombia and is being led by a wealthy and powerful group of investors from the private sector called Sindicato Antioqueño (Antiochian Syndicate), to which belong, among others, Grupo Empresarial Antioqueño (Antiochian Entrepreneur Group), Suramericana de Seguros (South American Insurance Company), Compañía Nacional de Chocolates (National Chocolate Company), Cementos Agros (Agro Cement Company), and Bancolombia (Bank of Colombia). Medellín, an expansive urban space, as the other Colombian urban centers, continues to present many contradictions and paradoxes: there seems to be a great deal of accumulation of wealth in the hands of a minority group, but a high percentage of the population still lives on the margins and under high rates of poverty, which can be seen in marked areas of the city and in the streets, particularly in certain areas of the city center.

Throughout its history, be it implicitly or explicitly, Medellín has played a salient role in the cultural production from Colombia and about Colombia, of which cinema, mainly in the eighties, nineties, and most recently, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has been no exception. Medellín, as a huge urban center and as a character in its films, became known internationally in cinematic expressions such as *Rodrigo D no futuro* (*Rodrigo D No Future*, dir. Víctor Gaviria, 1990), *La vendedora de rosas* (*The Rose Seller*, dir. Víctor Gaviria, 1998), *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (*The Virgin of the Assassins*, dir. Barbet Schroeder, 2002), *Rosario Tijeras* (dir. Emilio Maillé, 2005) and *Sumas y restas* (*Additions and Subtractions*, dir. Víctor Gaviria, 2005). All of these films, directly or indirectly, focus on different results of the violence—varied and various types—that has been present in the different public and private spaces of Medellín and how these forms of violence have affected all sectors, all ages, of the social imaginary and social realities.

In *Rodrigo D* as well as in *La vendedora*, we see Metrallo (a slang name for Medellín) as a huge urban space where the youth, both boys and girls—including very young ones—get lost in a universe in which what rules is the daily fight for survival of the fittest. Many of the “unfit” youth succumb, and the ones who do not have no choice but to develop a very hard shield. From the very start, Víctor Gaviria calls our attention to the fact that *Rodrigo D* is dedicated to the memory of John Gaviria, Jackson Gallego, Leonardo Sánchez, and Francisco Marín, actors (untrained “natural” actors, just as in Italian Neo-Realism) who lost their lives, even before they reached the age

of twenty, in the senseless violence of Medellín. Gaviria himself, in an interview with Carlos Jauregui, declared, “(e)s importante y estéticamente necesario saber que algunos de mis actores han muerto en esas guerras amorfas que se libran en Colombia; muchos siguen en la calle y son presa de la miseria y la droga” (226) ([i]t is important and aesthetically necessary to point out that some of my actors have died in those amorphous wars that take place in Colombia; many of them continue to live *in the streets* and are victims of poverty and drugs).<sup>1</sup>

Part of the hard cover or shield that the youth have to develop is shown in the language, which becomes the widespread performative language of violence and which can, at times, be used as a powerful weapon in the rough fight for survival. Let us remember that this is exactly what keeps the little girl—the youngest in the group of *vendedoras de rosas* (flower sellers)—out of trouble. The violent language used even by the very young ones seems to become second nature, given the continual and repetitious uses both within their families—many of which are dysfunctional families since the paternal figure is, in many cases, absent—and within their circle of friends who are thrown, directly or indirectly, into the clutches of the streets. These two latter phenomena are vividly present both in *La vendedora* and in *Rodrigo D*; that is, the geographical scene in Medellín, and then in the whole of Colombia, as well as the cinematic screen came to evince a whole “new” transgressive lexicon, even when not all of the words are technically neologisms; rather it is a question of their cumulative weight under constant use. This particular issue of the use and oral expression of “unintelligible” and “unnecessary”—just to use some of the adjectives that have consistently been used by conservative film and cultural critics offended by them—violent language became so problematic locally and beyond, which was one of the main reasons why these films were severely criticized and censored by both national and international film audiences and socio-cultural critics. However, in spite of this, it is worth pointing out what Víctor Gaviria himself, in an interview with Jáuregui, has argued in this regard:

Algunos han anotado que mis películas trabajan un tipo de violencia adicional a la del argumento mismo: la del lenguaje de los personajes [que] marca una especie de frontera o límite al cual se enfrentan muchos espectadores. [Trabajar] con actores naturales conlleva lidiar con su lenguaje. Ese lenguaje—que algunos les parece repetitivo, cansón, vulgar, oscuro, absurdo—expresa y alevosamente alude a la historia y a las historias de muchos, a determinados espacios de la ciudad, a *experiencias sociales profundas*. [El] *lenguaje de la calle* es un *lenguaje de guerra* que designa muy bien ese mundo y en el que se juega la obstinación de ciertas identidades. [Ese] problema, el de la traición a la inteligibilidad, es en todo caso un problema más fácil que el que tiene aquel que sufre la traición diaria de la vida. Es más sencillo no ver una

película o irritarse por la palabra *gonorrea* que admitir que para muchos el mundo es literalmente una *gonorrea*. [Esa], creo, es la violencia lingüística que sienten algunos espectadores. [Ese] lenguaje es muchísimo más importante que la película misma porque allí está *la historia* (la *de la ciudad*, las de los muchachos, la de los muertos, la de la injusticia, la de las experiencias de vida, la de la solidaridad y la identidad). (229–30, my emphasis)

(Some have noted that my films work a type of violence in addition to the violence of the plot itself: that of the language of the characters, which marks some kind of frontier that many film-goers have to face. To work with natural actors requires working with their language. That language—repetitive, tiring, vulgar, obscure, and absurd to many—expresses and alludes to history and to the story of many, to *certain spaces of the city, to profound social experiences*. The *language of the street* is a language of war that designates that world and expresses certain identities. [This] problem of unintelligibility is, anyway, an easier problem than that which is endured by those betrayed daily by life. It is much easier not to see a film, or get irritated by the word *gonorrhoea*, than to admit that, to many, the world is literally *gonorrhoea*. That is, I believe, the linguistic violence that some spectators feel. [This] language is much more important than the film itself because it is where *the history* is [*of the city, of the youth, of the dead, of injustice, of life experiences, of solidarity, and of identity*].)

In essence, that linguistic use of the youth is not only an expression of their own identity but one of social, cultural, and political resistance; it is a subversive, contesting, and transgressive discourse in opposition to the social, linguistic hegemonic system of the so called majority that tries to keep them on the margins and considers them *desechables* (disposable), ideas that Lecercle highlights in his text *The Violence of Language* when he says, “Majority means standards of behaviour, but also power and domination. As such, the majority always leaves out, or excludes, a minority that allows returns and threatens to subvert: the necessity of violence lies deep in the structure of language” (42).

In the particular case of *Rodrigo*, the verbal use of violent language is somehow projected into the lyrics of the songs that both Rodrigo himself and his peers in the *comunas* sing in their encounters, some of which say:

[n]unca tuve éxito . . .siempre nacido para perder . . .caminando por las calles sin saber a dónde voy . . .el sistema nos aliena...nos quiere consumir con promesas con dinero . . .ya no consigo satisfacción . . .ya ni con droga ni con alcohol . . .ya no consigo ninguna

reacción . . . ¿cómo me salvo yo?, ya no concibo más esta situación, ya ni con droga . . .

(I never succeeded . . . I was born to fail . . . walking around in the streets without knowing where to go . . . the system alienates us . . . it wants to consume us with promises of money . . . I have no satisfaction . . . I find no reaction not even with drugs or alcohol . . . I don't get any reaction . . . How do I save myself? I don't understand this situation . . . not even with drugs . . .)

It is worth pointing out what Martin-Barbero highlights in regard to this pre-text of the rock music used by the youth in Medellín linked to the linguistic violence commonly expressed:

En Colombia el rock en español nace ligado—primeros años ochenta—a un claro sentimiento pacifista con los grupos *Génesis* o *Banda Nueva*, pasando estos últimos años a decir la cruda experiencia urbana de las pandillas juveniles en los barrios de clase-media baja en Medellín y media-alta en Bogotá, convirtiéndose en vehículo de una conciencia dura de la descomposición del país, de la presencia cotidiana de la muerte en las calles, de la sin salida laboral, de la exasperación y lo macabro. Desde la estridencia del Heavy Metal a los nombres de los grupos—*La pestilencia*, *Féretro*, *Krahen*—y de la discoteca alucinante al concierto barrial, en el rock se hibridan hoy los sonos y los ruidos de nuestras ciudades con las sonoridades y los ritmos de las músicas indígenas y negras, y las estéticas de lo desechable con las frágiles utopías que surgen de la desazón moral y el vértigo audiovisual. (13, my emphasis)

(In Colombia, rock music has been linked to the peaceful sentiment of the group *Génesis* or *Banda Nueva*, but also in recent years to the rough *urban* experience of the gangs of young people in Medellín and Bogotá, becoming a medium of the hard consciousness of the decomposition of the country, of the presence of *daily death in the streets* [and] the macabre. [In] rock, there is a hybridism of the songs and the noises of our cities and the songs and rhythms of the indigenous and afrocolombian music, and the aesthetic of the disposable with the fragile utopias that emerge from the moral uneasiness.)

What is more, by revisiting the issue of linguistic violence once again, Gaviria's and Maille's lenses, full of curiosity, allow us to examine this linguistic arsenal not only as it is used naturally in daily survival interactions between the young workers (either *sicarios* [assassins] and/or rose sellers) and the rest of the people in the streets, but also as it is constantly and

repetitively expressed between mothers and daughters or brothers and sisters, and so on in the private spaces (or what would normally be considered private) of the so-called homes in the northeastern *comunas* (slums). In *La vendedora*, one of those days when Andrea (the smallest and youngest of the rose sellers<sup>2</sup>) returns home, sneaking in through the narrow space of the only window in the unfinished house where her mother, her stepfather, and her little sister live, what she encounters again is an angry mother who, using words that wound and symbolically kill, attacks and slaps her in the face. This is their telling violent exchange:

Andrea (the little daughter): Mamá, mama

Magnolia: ¿Dónde pasaste la hijueputa noche, culicagá?, vení (*la persigue para golpearla*) (“Where did you spend the fucking night, you son of a bitch? Come here [*she runs after her to hit her*]”)

Andrea: No me pegue (“Don’t hit me”)

Magnolia: ¿¿Cómo que no me pegue!? ¿¿Cómo que no me pegue!? (*le da una bofetada que la cámara oculta por medio de una cortina*) (“What do you mean don’t hit me!? “What do you mean don’t hit me!? [*she slaps her in the face, which the camera hides with a curtain*]”)

Andrea: ¿Por qué a la otra no le pega? ¡malparía! (“Why don’t you hit the other one? Motherfucker!”)

Magnolia: ¡Coma mierda! (“You asshole! Eat shit!”)

Andrea: ¡Malparía, hijueputa! (“Motherfucker, son of a bitch!”)

Given the whole socioeconomic situation in the area and the nature of the dysfunctional families living there, these verbal exchanges exemplify what could be considered perhaps a daily, “natural,” constant exchange between the youth and their elders in this part of the whole urban universe, as can be seen both in *Rodrigo* and in *La vendedora* alike. That is, indeed, a window that has been open for us to see for ourselves the close relationship between language and violence in the city—both in public and private spheres—and, in this way, to have a hint to consider from where this “exquisite” language originates. In *La vendedora*, Andrea, the little girl, has lost her innocence and has learned very well the sociolinguistic lessons to which she has been exposed both within her first “school” in her own “home” and in the life school in the streets. In other words, what she is doing is, in fact, just repeating the “natural” schemes and the “natural” grammars that she has learned and internalized, schemes in which language,

undoubtedly, plays the most fundamental role. Following Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, one can very easily argue that it is precisely in the language, in close relationship with other sociocultural factors, where the seeds of violence can be traced. In this light, it is worth pointing out what Butler has stated:

When we claim to have been *injured* by language, what kind of claim do we make? [Could] language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms? [We] *do* things with language, *produce effects* with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both “what” we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences. (1–8, my emphasis)

Moreover, Andrea, the nine year old street rose seller, is a key character to understand the direct impact of the violence (or the violent impact) in the city on the youth and the whole issue of the loss of context, a loss of belonging, a loss of a safe space. In spite of her fragile and yet innocent body, Andrea is able to escape the daily harsh situations that she constantly comes across in the city. Indeed, she manages to free herself from all the danger of such urban space where she has had to survive, a space that, given her age, does not exactly belong to her, a space to which she should not belong. After such an injurious and deadly linguistic arsenal that she has received from her mother, Andrea does not seem to have much of a choice but to return to the streets and to try to find some company there among her street peers, a fraternal, maternal, or paternal company that, consciously or unconsciously, she has been denied. This is one of the reasons why we see Andrea following the other girls, walking or running after them, as if she were lost, as if she were a leaf in the air, lost in space and time, out of context. In this light, in close connection to our reading here, Butler, too, in *Her Excitable Speech* has suggested that:

To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. Indeed, it may be that what is *unanticipated* about the injurious speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control. The capacity to circumscribe the situation of the speech act is jeopardized at the moment of injurious address. To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one's situation as the effect of such speech. Exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volatility of one's “place” within the

community of speakers; one can be “put in one’s place” by such speech, but such a place may be no place. (4, emphasis in original)

Medellín, as a huge industrial and prosperous city, likewise provides some “safe” space, some sacred space, where the gang members in *Rodrigo* have the opportunity to go to and carry out their own rituals—which include the use of some drugs—their own rehearsals before they go into the streets of the city to do their “job,” fighting against death; isolated space where they play their own music, have their own fights, which include fights using weapons such as broken bottles and knives. In other words, deadly practices and death are part of their daily routine; practices that provide them with the abilities and skills to survive in the tough urban space. This urban space, in certain walls of the city, also allows them to express their anger and their own discriminatory feelings against other sectors of the population; on one of the walls in one of the areas of the city, the graffiti reads: “Blacks . . . death to the black.” It is worth recalling that *paisa* society is one in which most of the families are of Spanish origin, that is they consider themselves “white,” therefore what the graffiti reads leads us to think that, indeed, the city is also a space where discriminatory practices against Afro-Colombian, indigenous people, alternative sexualities, among others, do take place.

Interestingly enough, *Rodrigo D*, *La vendedora*, *La Virgen*, *Rosario Tijeras*, and *Sumas y restas* all present a remarkable intertextual dialogue in connection with the markedly divided socioeconomic, thus sociocultural, world in Medellín. The boys in *Rodrigo* and in *La Virgen*—some of whom are trained *sicarios* or *sicarios* in training—and the girls in *La vendedora* come from the northeastern section of the city where the *comunas* are located. Similarly, in *Rosario Tijeras*, the stunningly beautiful *sicaria*, Rosario, and her family, live in the *comunas*. When we enter these spaces, guided by Gaviria’s, Schroeder’s, and Maillé’s lenses, one can witness the difficulties in which these young people and their relatives live; the houses are small and dark: it is a darkness which makes one wonder whether or not there is effective electric power or electric power at all. Likewise, the houses, or what appear to be houses, are narrow and unfinished. They look, for the most part, as if they were still under construction. Conversely, Antonio (Rosario’s lover) and Emilio (her friend and confidant) live in another totally different neighborhood of the city where the upper-middle class and wealthy families live. That is, Rosario, Antonio, and Emilio are but three examples of the different socioeconomic, sociocultural strata of Medellín.

In a similar fashion, in *Sumas*, Santiago Restrepo (Juan Carlos Uribe), another example of the middle class, lives in a privileged sector of Medellín; Gaviria’s camera allows us to see both the interior and exterior areas where he and his family enjoy all the comfort and luxuries of their socioeconomic

status. Santiago, his family, and their friends live in cozy houses, some of which have two floors, swimming pools, tall secure fences and gates (another indication of the security that must be enforced), and all the modern equipment and accessories. All of which would be just dreams for the people living on the *other* side of the city, the poor *comunas*. In other words, in this regard, in spite of the fact that they all share the same urban space, the world of Antonio, Emilio, and Santiago are totally different from that of Rodrigo, all the girls in *la vendedora*, Alexis and Wilmar in *La Virgen*, and Rosario, her brother, and the other *sicarios* in *Rosario Tijeras*.

Furthermore, as explicitly shown in *Rodrigo* and, to a large extent, in *Rosario*, some other spaces worth examining in this huge cinematic character of the city of Medellín are billiard parlors and discotheques. These two are of particular interest given the whole range of linguistic, gender, socioeconomic, and class expressions and divisions that take place. The billiards parlor is the masculine space *par excellence*, but it is also the space of intimidation where power is articulated and/or imposed, be it implicitly or explicitly. In this space the gang members, many of whom are *sicarios*, exhibit their masculinity in various ways that range from drinking alcohol, screaming their own “masculine” language, and, from time to time, exchanging some physical moves that, precisely, out of this “sacred” space—perhaps in a more public arena—could be considered “homosexual moves” by the reputedly rigorously conservative *paisa* tradition. In this sacred space there is no room for anyone else. Also, within the billiards parlor each group of gangs seems to have their own distinctive and identified area where no one else from a different gang identity dare enter or even approach.

With regard to the discotheque in *Rosario*, where Rosario appears to be the queen and where some of her killings took place, one can see that there is a marked division not so much of gender, but of class and socioeconomic status. In the lower area of this space is where men and women from the popular neighborhoods (some from the *comunas*) can interact, drink, and dance; whereas the upper area is where the “big” ones in the business of drugs, both sellers and consumers, can sit back, enjoy, and “do their thing.” Interestingly enough, we constantly see Rosario walking up and down the stairs that seem to divide such areas. In the lower area is where Rosario goes down to flirt and to dance with Antonio and to talk with Emilio. Upstairs is the privileged area and it appears to be so “reserved” that one can hardly see the faces of those who have the power in that realm. We would like to suggest that these stairs could be read as a metaphor of the socioeconomic stairs—of the popular and of the “high” class—that Rosario seems to walk so comfortably. Indeed, by comparing and contrasting these two spaces, it could very well be argued that both are a projection in miniature of the whole city space.

The so-called City of Eternal Spring, as viewed in recent films, is represented as a vast space described from apartment windows (as in *La Virgen*), from high balconies (as Rodrigo and Rosario contemplate it in *Rodrigo D* and in *Rosario Tijeras*), or tight close-ups (as in *La vendedora* or in *Sumas y restas*). It certainly is made visible to us as a huge metropolitan “lady” where, at the same time, everything and nothing at all happens. It is the city that the novelist Fernando Vallejo misses and seems to feel nostalgic about; it is *his* hometown in his memories, where he has come back only to see the huge changes that it has undergone, as is represented in *La desazón suprema: retrato incesante de Fernando Vallejo (Supreme Uneasiness: Incessant Portrait of Fernando Vallejo)*, Luis Ospina, 2003). At the same time, Medellín is the metropolis that belongs both to everybody and to nobody; it is like a mother, the “mother city” that seems to lack father and children; it is like a sister, like a girl that has neither father or mother nor brothers and sisters. It is a widow and an orphan.

The latter can be exemplified by the absence of the state, government control, or police guidance in the wide range of social detriment that take place anywhere and, as implied, everywhere regardless of class, gender, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds. This invisibility of the state or the police is made visible in, for instance *Rodrigo D*, when the robberies take place: on one occasion, some *sicarios* steal a Mazda leaving a small child who was in it in the streets and, on another, a motorcycle is snatched from a young man who can do nothing about it. The representatives of justice are invisible when the *sicarios* “do their job,” when a woman is found dead in the street and a young boy is found dead in the mountains (near the *comunas*); nobody asks anything, nobody knows anything, no one has seen anything, there is no investigation where normally one would expect the presence of the police as mediator between the crime (or the criminals) and the state or the judiciary system. There seems to be no organization of any kind in this regard. What seems to reign is terror and silence. In one of the scenes, one of the gang members points out: “Los tombos les tienen miedo a los pelaos por agresivos” (The police are afraid of those guys because they are so aggressive).

Similar cases are presented in *La vendedora*, in *La Virgen*, in *Rosario Tijeras*, and in *Sumas y restas*. In *La vendedora*, in one of the instances when Mónica and Anderson argue, the police show up to see if they have drugs on them. Supposedly, they inspect them thoroughly; however, Anderson had hidden some cigars of marijuana in the little compartments of a radio which the police fail to find. When they depart, Anderson and Mónica laugh at them. Anderson says, “Venga, Mónica usted sabe que esas gonorreas no se llevan nada tampoco” (Come on, Mónica, you know that those motherfuckers won’t get anything). It is implied here that if the police get to the scene of an incident or accident, it is usually too late, or that the police are also accomplices; they pretend that they see and apply the law

whenever needed, but not really. In this particular point, it is illuminating what Salazar (1990) has stressed:

Los sectores populares ven al Estado como algo lejano o enemigo. “Llegó la ley” dicen cuando llega la policía, que es la imagen más permanente del gobierno que tienen y la peor. “Los tombos son los peores delincuentes.” No hay confianza en la capacidad reguladora del Estado. [No] se teme a ser detenidos y juzgados. [Más] allá de la impunidad está la complicidad. [En] los testimonios de los habitantes de los barrios y de jóvenes integrantes de banda aparecen con frecuencia referencias a la complicidad de miembros de los cuerpos de seguridad. [Por] eso decía un sardino de una banda: “[Yo] quiero meterme con el gobierno, ellos matan pero con todas las de la ley.” Tiene razón el cineasta Víctor Gaviria cuando dice que en estas zonas de ladera la única ley que funciona es la ley de la gravedad. (375–76)

(Marginal areas think of the police as a remote entity or as enemies. “The law is here” is what they say when the police get to the spot, which is the most vivid image of the government—and the worst—that they have. ‘The police are the worst criminals.’ There is no trust in the State. They are not afraid to be detained or judged. Beyond impunity, there is complicity. In the testimonies of the people from the neighborhoods and from the gang members, the complicity among the members of the legal system gets mentioned constantly. This is why, a young member of a gang said ‘I want to work for the government; they make sure that they apply the law just by killing.’ The filmmaker Víctor Gaviria is right when he says that in these zones the only law that works is the law of gravity.)

In this urban universe, Gaviria’s and Maillé’s cameras allow us see that the police are certainly an absent element as guides or granters of order and justice; that is, the idea of social order and justice is totally absent for the people of the *comunas*, in particular, and for the rest of the *other* social fabric in the popular sectors of the metropolitan areas, in general. If there is some order, this seems to be that of the *sicarios* and the crazy gunmen. In no way is all of the above different in *La Virgen*. The *sicarios* execute their job and kill their targets (and sometimes, mistakenly, not even their targets) and there is no justice whatsoever to be found. In *Rosario Tijeras*, the *sicaria femme fatale* applies her own “justice,” as do the rest of *sicarios*, but the police are never there. In *Sumas y restas*, the illegal transactions do take place: there are strange vehicles being driven in the streets; however, nobody sees them. There are “hot” hidden spots around the city and, apparently, nobody knows and, if someone does, they pretend not to. Nobody seems to care. No one dares to question or speak their mind. All that prevails is the

culture of *traqueteo* or *boleteo* (illegal transactions). In this light, and in dialogue with Salazar, Rossana Reguillo-Cruz asserts:

Dueño y señor de las calles, el policía ejerce su dominio en un mundo al revés. *En la calle*, he escuchado decir a madres desesperadas ante un niño llorón, “cállate o te lleva la policía.” Versión contemporánea del ancestral “coco” mexicano, el policía se convierte en el espanto para corregir conductas. En una muestra de cien notas periodísticas de prensa nacional, tomadas al azar en 1999, 48% involucraron a algún policía en hechos delictivos: secuestros, torturas, violaciones, narcotráfico, violencia doméstica, corrupción. El panorama resulta desolador, pero lo que interesa destacar aquí es el sentido de ese “otro construido” en su relación con los miedos y sus formas de respuesta en la *sociedad urbana*. Como la gente ya no puede diferenciar entre las fuerzas del orden y los delincuentes, se rompe *el ecosistema de la ciudad*, se disloca la brújula que orienta *la sociedad*, las creencias se fracturan y *la ciudad* se transforma en escenario de sobrevivencia. (63–64, my emphasis)

(Kings and masters in the streets, policemen exercise their power in a messed-up world. In the streets, I have heard desperate mothers say to their crying children ‘shut up or the police will get you.’ As a contemporary version of the Mexican ‘devil,’ policemen become a threat to correct misbehavior. In a sample of one hundred national newspaper notes, taken randomly in 1999, 48% included the police as participants in criminal acts: kidnapping, tortures, violations, drug trafficking, domestic violence, and corruption. The panorama is desolating, but what is interesting to point out here is the sense of that ‘constructed other’ in its relation to fear and its ways of answering to an urban society. As people are no longer able to differentiate between the enforcers of law and order and the criminals, the dynamic of the city is shattered, the compass that orients society is displaced, beliefs get fractured and the city transforms into a scenario of survival.)

There certainly is a close relationship between the proliferation of illicit activities, the growth of criminal organizations, all sorts of chaos and dangers (e.g. robberies, killings, and the like) in the streets, and the invisibility of the State and/or of the police as representatives or grantors of security from the State, all of which has, in one way or another, directly and manifestly impacted the social dynamics and the interpersonal relationships both in the private and public spheres of the so-called postmodern urban space in Medellín. Both the social imaginary and social behavior has, no doubt, been drastically transformed. Martín Barbero talks about “*la ciudad que median los miedos*” (the city that mediates fear). People in the streets will not start conversations or interact with strangers that easily and openly;

everyone sees everyone else with certain disdain and a great dose of suspicion or mistrust. This social fear has, consequently, changed the homes (perhaps not so much in the *comunas*), residential areas, and businesses around the city. Everyone seems to feel the need to feel secure or somehow protected; it undoubtedly is the survival of the fittest. It is then no mere coincidence that houses, apartment buildings, commercial centers, and small businesses in all areas—central and peripheral—have made every effort to employ security personnel, guards, body guards, and to install gates around their properties with high-tech security systems. These postmodern, social, and metropolitan dynamics and transformations, implicitly or explicitly and/or with certain winks, have been registered by Gaviria in films and certainly by Schroeder in *La Virgen* and Maillé in *Rosario*. Indeed, private security companies have seen a remarkable prosperity in the last two decades in the huge Colombian urban centers. On these particularities, Martín Barbero has argued that:

[El] 85% de los colombianos que habitan las seis ciudades más grandes confiesa no hablar con extraños, el 72% redujo la frecuencia en que salía de noche, el 54% ha dejado de salir para cuidar la casa, para el 73% la seguridad es una obsesión cotidiana. Todo lo cual se traduce en una lista de miedos bien concretos: a caer secuestrado en los retenes—llamados primeramente “pescas milagrosas” y hoy pescas diabólicas—que la guerrilla monta y desmonta instantáneamente en las principales carreteras del país, a abordar un taxi en la calle, a sacar el automóvil de noche, [a] salir de madrugada de la casa en que los amigos jóvenes hacen fiesta instituyéndose la costumbre de quedarse a dormir en ella, a refugiarse los fines de semana en los centros comerciales como único lugar de encuentro seguro. (21–22)

(85% of citizens who live in the six largest cities of Colombia say that they do not talk to strangers, 72% do not go out of their homes as frequently as they used to; 54% prefer staying in to protect their homes, and for 73% safety is a daily obsession. All of which translates into a list of very concrete fears: fear of being kidnapped at military checkpoints—first called a “miraculous catch” and now today a “diabolic catch”—that the guerrilla is able to instantaneously set up and undo on the main roads of the country, to hail a taxi in the streets, to drive at night, to leave parties at dawn from friends’ homes—establishing the practice of sleeping over, to find refuge at shopping centers as the only places of safe encounters.)

Nevertheless, in this urban universe of apocalyptic nature, there are two details in two different diegetic stories which, too, have caught our attention and that point to the value that life has acquired in such context. On the one

hand, in *Rodrigo D* some kids, who had just gotten out of school, find a *ranita* (small frog) when walking up the mountains and play around with it; they are actually running after it with the intention of killing it until Tavo, one of the young gang members, takes notice of that. He yells at them and makes them stop the killing of the animal, which in Tavo's mind appears to be a horrendous thing to do. He tells them to leave the *ranita* alone. Being a *sicario*, Tavo does not seem to have any problem killing people; however, he feels that the killing of the little frog is something that he must stop.

On the other hand, a similar scene is presented in *La Virgen* when Vallejo and Alexis are walking in the street and take notice of a dog that had been run over; the dog seems to be in such a bad condition that putting it to rest sounds like the best thing to do. Vallejo and his lover approach the dog and the former tells the latter just to kill it, but surprisingly (given his "nature" as a skilled killer) Alexis refuses to do it; he just says that he does not want to do it nor does he feel capable of doing it. It is then when Vallejo, evidencing some shock, decides to do it himself, to which Alexis opposes strongly. They both strive ferociously: the grammarian wanting to kill the dog as the solution to its pain, and the *sicario* trying to stop him. These are two very telling examples that lead us to reflect upon the value of life or, at least, to compare some people's imaginaries there in regard to human life versus animal life. In another scene, Vallejo declares: "*Es un pecado seguir pariendo*" (it is a sin to keep on giving birth), "*quitarle la vida a alguien es hacerle un favor*" (to kill someone is to do him/her a favor).

Linked to these two latter details that focus on the value of animal versus human life, we would now like to shift our attention to the expression of affection and love that, amidst these rough violent situations in the city, still seems to prevail. In other words, no matter how cruel the urban violence might be, there is still some space for friendliness, tenderness, and warmth, as Correa Restrepo puts it "Por brutal y violento que sea ese otro mundo, las películas de Gaviria—su Mirada—alcanzan a expresar un nivel de ternura, de comprensión y de amor como no se encuentra en otros ejemplos del cine contemporáneo" (32) (No matter how violent and brutal that other world might be, Gaviria's films—his look—express a level of tenderness, understanding, and love that cannot be found in any other example of contemporary cinema).

Indeed, in spite of such violent socio-filmic realities, people look for spaces to enjoy life and opportunities to escape such a chaos. Apart from the scene of the little frog, in *Rodrigo* another sequence that touches upon the expression of tenderness and thirst for love is when Rodrigo pays a visit to a friend of his mother's and together look at photos of her, comparing Rodrigo's mother to a virgin. In another scene, in the same film, in the midst of night, Alfredo cannot go to sleep and goes to his mother; he invites her to go for a walk together, to smoke marijuana, and just to talk about the father who is not there, to talk about the loss of a real family. Similarly, instances

of expression of fondness, attachment and, to a certain extent, belonging are shown in *La vendedora* when, for instance, every time that Mónica sniffs glue to escape her reality, she “sees” (or thinks that she sees), as a result of hallucination, her dead grandmother. Of course, in her hallucination, Mónica’s beloved grandmother is alive and even talks to her, asking her why she has gone without her; she tells her that she wants to be with her. That is, Mónica longs for some tenderness and love that she has been denied. Some other scenes in which one can witness warmth, liking, and belonging is when all the girls in *La vendedora* talk to one another as if one of them were the mother or the elder sister who really cares about the younger ones; for the most part, they give advice to one another and try to protect one another against the rough realities of the various types of violence of the urban chaotic milieu in which they are immersed.

Contrary to *Rodrigo* or *La vendedora*, maternal love is expressed and seen in *Sumas y Restas* when Santiago’s wife takes care of their little baby son, especially when her husband is away “on business.” This mother, unlike Mónica’s, Andrea’s, Rosario’s or Chinga’s, does care; she fills the void that her father leaves whenever he is away in crazy parties of excess and extravaganza with his “friends” of the illicit business. This middle-class mother seems to care a lot about the baby’s present and future; she appears to be really concerned about keeping her family together. As for *Rosario*, antidotes of the violent chaos in Medellín are expressed by Rosario, the *sicaria* of provocative deadly lips, to her brother Johnefe (Rodrigo Oviedo). Rosario acts as if, instead of a sister, she were Johnefe’s mother, she does feel and expresses her love to him; she cares about him and tries to protect him as much as she can. She takes care of his “tools,” his “job equipment,” his munitions, makes sure that everything is in place, and prepares them whenever he has to go out “to work.” With complete awareness of the danger in Johnefe’s job (he is also a *sicario*) she prays to the Virgin for his brother’s safety and life; she puts the scapulary of good luck around his neck, and washes the bullets in holy water hoping that they will not miss and will go straight to the intended target. She hugs and kisses him whenever he goes out into the uncertainties of the street.

In connection with what we have just previously discussed above and with the close interconnectedness between language and violence, there is also the dimension of the absence of the family as a coherent and cohesive unit or the presence of dysfunctional families that, equally, lack these two characteristics and that we have briefly mentioned. This particular issue is presented somewhat differently in *Sumas y Restas* where the middle class family (at least Santiago’s immediate family) seems to be united; although there is a latent danger of breakage that, with a sort of open end, seems to be unresolved towards the end of the diegetic story. Nonetheless, in *Rodrigo*, as has been illustrated, the maternal figure is absent. Rodrigo lives with his sister (with whom he argues and fights on a number of occasions) and his

father; however, this paternal figure appears to be distant. We do not see a solid close relationship between the two of them; not even between the father and Rodrigo's sister.

Consequently, Rodrigo does not seem to fit in that violent situation in which he lives and in which the other young boys of the *comunas* live. Rodrigo, just like his father, appears lost in thought and distant all the time; he does not talk very much; he seems to pronounce complete words only when it is absolutely necessary. Like Andrea, he appears to be out of context; and one of the reasons why he does not fit is precisely his lack of expression of emotions, as if he were internalizing all that happens around him. Let us remember how significant the absence of the mother is for him: he longs for her presence and her tenderness. This void space of the mother, one can argue, is a projection of his apparent void of language. In this regard, it is worth having recourse to Butler's theoretical suggestion when she declares in her *Gender Trouble* that:

[I]n effect, the *loss of the maternal body* as an object of love is understood to establish the empty space out of which words originate. But the refusal of this loss—melancholy—results in the failure to displace into words; indeed, the place of the maternal body as is established in the body, “encrypted” [and] given permanent residence there as a dead and deadening part of the body or one inhabited or possessed by phantasms of various kinds. (87, the emphasis is mine)

Correspondingly, as we have already hinted, in *La vendedora* all these girls selling roses in the streets of the city also come from dysfunctional families. We do not get to see Mónica's parents; Andrea's mother and little sister live with a stepfather who, by the way, as we witness tries to molest her had it not been for Andrea's efficient defense through the use of the language that she has learned well, in spite of the fact that she does not produce it fluently due to her stuttering. Given the facts shown, we wonder if this stepfather molests Andrea's little sister, as well. A loving and caring father is totally absent in Andrea's world. In the group of boys that interact with the girls in the dark and chaotic streets of Medellín, we do not see traces of complete families or families at all. Focusing on el Zarco, Mónica's killer, in one of the scenes towards the middle, we witness him talking with her mother or, better put, manipulating her, regardless of the fact that she tenderly gives him advice to leave that troubled world in which he lives. Like many of the girls and all the other boys in his gang, el Zarco does not have a father or paternal figure. Interestingly enough, Diana, the Afro-Colombian girl, is the only girl who—although she does not seem to have a mother—goes back to a family nest. Diana's father, an Afro-Colombian man, desperately looks for her everywhere until he finds her and, in spite of Diana's initial opposition and that of her street friends, convinces her to go

back with him. That is, Diana is, indeed, rescued from the threats of the streets.

In *La Virgen de los Sicarios*, we can see Alexis and Wilmer in the same problematic sphere; neither of them appears to have a paternal father on whom to rely or to go to when they are in the midst of trouble, which is constantly. We hear Alexis talk about her mother who lives up in the mountains in the almost inaccessible *comunas*. We hear Alexis say that one of the things she desires most in life is buying her mom a home and a high-tech refrigerator like those that, miraculously, provide ice on the spot. We also hear Alexis' five-year old brother say that, when he grows up, he really wants to be like his older brother. However, we do not see nor hear anything about Alexis' father. Once again the paternal figure is invisible or absent, which hints to some directions: either we are in front of irresponsible fatherhood or the paternal figure, like the tradition of violence here makes us think—from generation to generation—has socially, thus cinematically, been killed.

Nor has Rosario Tijeras escaped this harsh reality; she has grown up in the northeastern *comunas*, in the midst of continual internal and external violence, with her much beloved brother Johnefe, her almost absent mother, and an abusive stepfather. That is, here the story repeats itself. As in *La vendedora*, Rosario has to put up with a paternal figure that molests her, in spite of the fact that her mother, Doña Ruby (Alejandra Borrero), knows about it, but pretends not to, in order to, it seems, keep the masculine figure with her. Let us keep in mind that Rosario has also been victimized by a masculine or masculinist tough environment. In any case, disintegration of the family or the presence of the family as an absent element is crucial in these recent stories and in this whole history to understand the impact of the violence in the urban panorama. The dissolution of the nucleus of the family, children in the streets, absence of love, and the like is linked to what Víctor Gaviria, cited in César Montoya, has explained:

[Los] niños *de la calle* no sólo no están en la calle, sino que están también en *otro mundo*, que es el mundo del sacol. Lo que es impresionante es ver que ellos mismos están *buscando un camino* para llegar a un lugar del cual los han desalojado como niños, que es un *mundo del amor original*, de la madre, de la abuela o del padre. [Al] caer a la calle, ellos han perdido ese mundo originario en el cual todos nosotros recibimos fuerzas más originarias para poder vivir y subsistir, *las fuentes del amor*. (33, my emphasis)

(Homeless children are not only in the street, they are also in another world, which is the world of the glue—some sort of shoe glue that is inhaled. What is surprising is that they are searching for that place from which they have been brutally displaced as children: a world of original

love, from the mother, the grandmother or the father. Once thrown into the streets, they lose that originating world where we all receive the most basic strengths necessary in order to be able to live and to sustain the sources of love.)

In that *other* world of the streets in that *other* Medellín, in the Medellín of all and, at the same time, of nobody, there seems to be space for all; of course, some of those spaces stand out as privileged ones and so many others, on the contrary, have stood out as unprivileged. At any rate, in this complex postmodern panorama of “Metrallo,” we see workers and snatchers, small-market business people or in street stands, cloth sellers, butchers, cops, middle- and high-class youths in restaurants and discotheques, very young rose sellers, *sicarios*, and more recently *sicarias*, the feminine counterparts; all of whom share the streets for survival. It is the street urban spaces of adults. However, it is also a huge metropolitan universe where, as a result of the culture of “everyone on their own,” young girls and young boys have been thrown. It is where these disposable youth, as constructed by the hegemonic society, have to struggle for survival day after day. It is, indeed, the survival of the fittest. And given the categorical lack of any sign of dignified human existence, people, particularly the young, fall easy prey to illicit businesses and prostitution.

This postmodern Medellín in film and the films themselves are immersed in the contemporary recent history of neoliberalism in Colombia, in the sociocultural panorama of capitalist globalization, which, in theory, was meant to provide open markets and more opportunities for everyone. Supposedly, it was meant to narrow and then eventually make the huge gaps between low, middle, and high socioeconomic strata disappear. This is yet to happen in Medellín or in any other Latin American city, as Foster quite succinctly puts it in his discussion of *La Virgen de los sicarios*:

This Medellín is most assuredly the image of civilization as death, not in the metaphoric way of Freud and Marcuse and the utopian formulations of the sexual revolution, but literally: the implicit point of the film that *globalization*—in this case centered on the drug trade so crucial to Colombian economy that is merely fulfilling a bottomless pit of international demand for its major cash crop—brings with it not integration into a joyfully expanding capitalist fantasy but a *dreadful social violence* that rivals the worst images of lawlessness in human history. [Another] way of looking at the matter is that Medellín is the consequence of the inevitable *logic of late capitalism*, whereby its necessary insertion into a globalized economy through the capitalization and exploitation of the export crop it has to offer, drugs, has produced a grotesque parody of economic success that can only be sustained

through high-tech violence: Alexis's greatest fantasy is to own an Uzi submachine gun. (79–80, my emphasis)

Undeniably, as a result of fairly recent capitalist, neoliberal, and globalizing policies, Medellín has seen a quite remarkable industrial, economic, and cultural change and growth in the last two decades. Nowadays, Medellín, as the Industrial City—another of its popular names—is proud to be the only city in Colombia that has a metro system; it offers some the most elegant and sophisticated shopping centers in Latin America, astonishing museums—such as the Museo de Antioquia (Antioquia Museum), industrial parks, state-of-the-art libraries (who is fortunate enough to enter and use them?) and some of the most prestigious universities (who has the opportunity to attend them?) in Colombia and South America. Likewise, Medellín has been the scene of national and international academic encounters of the highest caliber. The most recent administrations have tried to develop two major programs: “La Ciudad Jardín” (The Garden City) and “la más educada” (the most educated), initiatives whose main objectives has been to make Medellín—given its privileged nature, plants, and flowers—the greenest city in the Americas and the city with the highest educational rate.

In opposition, however, the “widow or orphan city,” “the city of all and of no one,” the *other* city, as we have seen and read it, continues to pay its price. As witnessed, the very young girls and boys in *La vendedora* and in *Rodrigo D* as well as the youth in *La Virgen*, in *Rosario*, and the illicit drug dealers and *sicarios*—mainly when they were young girls and boys—in *Sumas y restas* do not seem to have known nor enjoyed whatsoever the exquisite pleasures of such a postmodern metropolis. Perhaps none of them—and the vast majority whom they represent both in social and cinematic realities—has even realized that such exquisiteness exists. It is so, precisely, because they live in *another* reality, *another* world; they continue to walk the streets of the *other* city that the postmodern globalization—or the globalizing postmodernity—has denied them physically and symbolically. Therefore, such is a space where they have no place; there seems to be no room for them: it is an urban space they cannot yet enter. Indeed, Medellín, like any other Latin American urban center, continues to be an exquisite space of ironies and paradoxes.

## Notes

1. Translations throughout are my own.
2. It is worth recalling that one of Medellín's many boosterish soubriquets is that of “The City of Flowers.”

## Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Correa, Julián David. *Cuadernos de cine colombiano: balance argumental*. Bogotá: Cinemateca Distrital 1, 2003.
- La desazón suprema: retrato incesante de Fernando Vallejo*. Dir. Luis Ospina. Perf. Fernando Vallejo, Antonio Caballero, Carlos Monsivais, William Ospina, Elena Poniatowska, Barbet Schroeder y Sandro Romero Rey. 2003.
- Foster, David William. *Queer Issues in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.
- Hopenhayn, Martín. "Droga y violencia: fantasmas de la nueva metrópoli latinoamericana." *Espacio urbano, comunicación y violencia en América Latina*. Ed. Mabel Moraña. Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2002. 69–88.
- Jáuregui, Carlos. "Violencia, representación y voluntad realista. Entrevista con Víctor Gaviria." *Espacio urbano, comunicación y violencia en América Latina*. Ed. Mabel Moraña. Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2002. 223–36.
- Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. *The Violence of Language*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Martín Barbero, Jesús. "La ciudad que median los miedos." *Espacio urbano, comunicación y violencia en América Latina*. Ed. Mabel Moraña. Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2002. 19–35.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Metáforas de la experiencia social." *La cultura en las crisis latinoamericanas*. Ed. Alejandro Grimson. Buenos Aires: CLASCO, 2004. 293–311.
- Montoya, César. "Búsqueda de las fuentes del amor." *Kinetoscopio* 41 (1997): 56–67.
- Reguillo-Cruz, Rossana. "¿Guerreros o ciudadanos? Violencia(s). Una cartografía de las interacciones urbanas." *Espacio urbano, comunicación y violencia en América Latina*. Ed. Mabel Moraña. Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2002. 51–67.
- Rodrigo D no futuro*. Dir. Víctor Gaviria. Perf. Ramiro Meneses, Carlos Mario Restrepo, Jackson Gallego, Vilma Díaz y Oscar Hernández. 1990.
- Rosario Tijeras*. Dir. Emilio Maillé. Perf. Flora Martínez, Unax Ugalde, Manolo Cardona, Rodrigo Oviedo, Alonso Arias, and Alejandra Borrero. 2005.
- Salazar, Alonso. *No nacimos pa' semilla: la cultura de las bandas juveniles de Medellín*. Medellín: Corporación Región, 1990.
- Sumas y restas*. Dir. Víctor Gaviria. Perf. Alonso Arias, María Isabel Gaviria, Freddy York Monsalve, Fabio Restrepo, and Ana María Naranjo. 2004.
- La vendedora de rosas*. Dir. Víctor Gaviria. Perf. Lady Tabares, Marta Correa, Mileider Gil, Diana Murillo, Liliana Giraldo, Álex Bedoya y Giovanni Quiroz. 1998.
- La Virgen de los sicarios*. Dir. Barbet Schroeder. Perf. Germán Jaramillo, Anderson Ballesteros, Juan David Restrepo y Manuel Busquets. 2000.

---

Caro-Melendez, Eduardo. "And Medellín Exits the Closet: Postmodern Urban Stories." *Latin American Urban Cultural Production*. Ed. David William Foster. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 3.4 (Fall 2008): 71–91.

[http://spanport.clu.umn.edu/publications/HispanicIssues/pdfs/caro\\_melendez.pdf](http://spanport.clu.umn.edu/publications/HispanicIssues/pdfs/caro_melendez.pdf)

The [LOCKSS system](#) preserves *Hispanic Issues On Line* at worldwide research libraries. ISSN 1931–8006.

---