

◆ 3

Decentering the “Centro”: *Noir* Representations and the Metamorphosis of Bogotá

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(Translated by Laura Chesak)

The four feature films to be discussed here—*La gente de La Universal* (*The People at the Universal*, dir. by Felipe Aljure, 1993), *Soplo de vida* (*Breath of Life*, dir. by Luis Ospina, 1999), *Perder es cuestión de método* (*The Art of Losing*, dir. by Sergio Cabrera, 2004) and *La historia del baúl rosado* (*The Story of the Pink Trunk*, dir. by Libia Gómez; 2005)—are all set in Bogotá, primarily in the so-called *Centro* of the city, and coincide in being exponents of the *noir* genre in Colombia. The latter two films are also connected tangentially to the 2003 Law on Filmmaking.¹ These new regulations on Colombian film production have resulted in a significant increase in the attention paid to urban space, an aspect which was already evident in Aljure’s and Ospina’s films and also in Víctor Gaviria’s portrayal of Medellín. Although Bogotá has always been a recurring scene in Colombian film production (which has been extensive in terms of years of existence, though not in numbers of films), with the exception of Sergio Cabrera’s *La estrategia del caracol* (*The Snail’s Strategy*, 1993) little has been said about the portrayal of the Colombian capital, especially when we consider the abundant literature that has been generated on the binary opposition between margin and center in films on Medellín.

Among the Colombian exponents of *film noir* in question, the representation of urban Bogotá provides specific characteristics that contribute amply to the peculiarities of the genre’s adoption in the case of Latin America. As such, the choice of locations takes on special significance, in particular the city’s *Centro*, a zone that includes both the Historic Downtown of the city and the so-called International Center. Although the growth of the city may have dislocated its one-time centrality and the physical center of the current-day city may actually be located further north (cartographically speaking, and taking into account that the city

has also expanded towards the south, east and west, perhaps the Ciudad Salitre sector may be nowadays the new geographical center of the city), Bogotá's *Centro* is still understood as that same concentration of the center of power from colonial times. For Angel Rama, "At the center of each colonial city, in greater or lesser scale according to the place of each in the hierarchy of urban centers, nestled a corresponding version of the city of letters to attend the mechanisms of political power" (18); in its Baroque conception, that city had expanded following "the ubiquitous checkerboard grid that has endured practically until the present day" (5). Hence, the dislocation of centrality also has to do with the marginal character that the Latin American city's downtown gradually acquires as the administrative, economic, and cultural axes are displaced towards territories that take shape as more benign for the new economic order. Put in such a way, these four cinematic productions constitute a visual record of a Bogotá that is disappearing and is worth considering. With the exception of *Perder es cuestión de método*, the camera is fixated on the city's *Centro*, configuring it as a place that resists losing its character as a nodal point amidst the ebb and flow of the new global economy.

The specific goal of this discussion is to analyze how these cinematic productions reincorporate Bogotá's *Centro* into an economy of value, introducing a type of mediation by means of cinematic space that recovers it and appropriates it, not necessarily for its architectural and aesthetic value but as a component of the general process of the production of historical meaning. In these four full-length films, the city's *Centro* becomes a space of resistance that escapes the dominion of neo-liberal logic, at least partially and temporarily. With this in mind, it is more useful to organize the discussion not by the date of production of the films themselves, but by the chronological order of the changes to the city that their narratives reveal, spanning from the 1940s to the current day.

It is not my purpose to prove or disprove the intentionality of the directors to use these locations for the ends that I am about to propose. It can be said that the very images in movement throughout these productions make them susceptible to such a reading. In their exploration of Bogotá's urban spaces, these feature films do not function on the basis of a binary opposition between periphery and center; rather, they offer a critique of the articulation of the dynamics of economic and cultural power. Bogotá as protagonist of the cinematic narrative is not central to a single one of these films. Of greater importance is how they refer to diverse notions of human geography in which the inhabitants' life acquires meaning through their interaction with the city. In the Bogotá shown in these films, such geography is strongly linked to corruption, extortion, and the mechanisms of powerful economies that arise outside the law.

Before examining each film in greater depth, it is worth pointing out another series of elements that characterizes these four full-length films: for

one, the fact that they are all exponents of the *noir* genre bears witness to a movement in Colombian film production towards greater diversification in cinematographic language. Although Colombian films seldom manage to distance themselves from a thematic focus on the multiple forms of violence that converge there, in the last two decades there has been an effort to make incursions into other film genres as well as to find new backdrops and narratives. For another, within that framework and after Víctor Gaviria’s films—in a certain sense, *Rodrigo D. No futuro* (1990) breaks with a strong tradition of filming the rural—the preoccupation with using film as a means to record the effect that industrialization, urbanization, and massification have had on the city has taken on particular resonance. In the case of Bogotá a large part of the attention shown in recent decades, not only in films but also in other cultural products, derives from the transformations that were initiated by mayors Antanas Mockus (1995–1997) and Enrique Peñalosa (1998–2000). During these administrative periods, Bogotá became a type of urban laboratory for projects of cultural agency, in the case of Mockus, and for rethinking public space, in the case of Peñalosa. Although neither of those mayoralties ended without causing considerable division between allies and adversaries of their agendas, their transcendence can certainly be measured: the changes taking place in current-day Bogotá and the new movements towards the future have been marked by those mayoral terms.²

One last point of convergence can be summed up through the words of director Luis Ospina, for whom elements of the *noir* genre are readily found in Colombian daily life:

[. . .] la cosecha roja que ha dejado aquí el narcotráfico ha convertido este país en un país donde vivimos todos los días una película de cine negro. Tenemos todos los ingredientes. Tenemos corrupción política— todos sabemos lo que es eso—, tenemos ajustes de cuentas, masacres, monitas retrecheras, ambientes corruptos y todo ese tipo de cosas. (*El cine no paga* 99)

([. . .] the red harvest that drug-trafficking has left here has turned this country into a country where every day we live [in] a *film noir* movie. We have all the ingredients. We have political corruption—we all know what that is—, we have scores being settled, massacres, manipulative bottle-blondes, corrupt atmospheres and all that type of things.)

As such, the *noir* genre, widely linked to an urban tradition, finds in Bogotá an ideal space for the exploration of such everyday ingredients. Ospina makes note, in passing, of the adaptability of a genre that was born in Hollywood and has been reproduced throughout various countries. For him, *noir*:

viaja muy bien, además es un género que no ha envejecido mucho, porque es un género donde uno puede manejar cierta ambigüedad moral, donde los buenos no son totalmente los buenos, ni los malos son totalmente malos, sino que estos personajes están envueltos en un ambiente corrupto que permea todo y que afecta todo. (99)

(travels very well; besides that, it is a genre that has not aged very much, because it is a genre in which one can manipulate a certain moral ambiguity, where the good guys aren't completely good, nor are the bad guys completely bad; rather, the characters are enveloped in a corrupt environment that permeates everything and affects everything.)

Despite this vaunted adaptability, one of the greatest challenges in transferring the *noir* genre in order to capture the particular nature of the Latin American megalopolis consists of the search for a unique vocabulary, avoiding the simple reproduction of archetypal forms such as the hard-boiled P.I. and the detective narrative. It should be noted that even Edward Dimendberg in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*—an in-depth analysis of the ideological importance of the use of space in *film noir* in light of the theories of Henri Lefebvre—asserts that his work comes about due to the lack of analysis of the urban element in the films that interest him (American *film noir* from 1939 to 1959). What has been written on Latin American *noir* is sporadic and oriented towards particular films; thus there is a scarcity of analysis of the particular relationship between the Latin American city and the genre in comparison to the literature on *film noir* and European cities and—Dimendberg's complaint notwithstanding—Los Angeles and New York, in the case of the U.S.

In his seminal study on the genre, James Naremore offers two concrete references to Latin America that are utilized in American *noir*: on one hand, there are Latin American cities and towns that represent “going south” in some classic Hollywood *noir* films as a means to provide catharsis, escape or picturesque scenery for passionate romances (229–32). On the other hand, the critic mentions the saga of detective novels that were generated in countries like Argentina after Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Davis Goodis were translated into Spanish (28). Without a lengthy exposition and without getting into a discussion of urban space, he also cites the long tradition of Latin American *noir* whose films “usually represent the Latin world as a dark metropolis rather than as a baroque, vaguely pastoral refuge from modernity, and as a result, they indirectly reveal a mythology at work in Hollywood” (232).

That dark character permeates the selection of space in the *noir* tradition from diverse geographies in such a way that studies of *film noir* and space in the context of European and U.S. cities can partially illuminate the discussion of *noir* and the Latin American city. Nevertheless, these studies

become limiting when they are checked against the particular development of the Latin American city. Dimendberg describes some of the unique characteristics of *noir* sets in the U.S. context, dividing his discussion between centripetal spaces, characterized by a fascination with urban density and the visible—the skyline, monuments, recognizable public spaces and neighborhoods—and centrifugal spaces, which lead towards the immaterial, the invisible and speed, a division taken from the writings of Frank Lloyd Wright on urban planning. The author reminds us that the urban projects of the post-war period are decisive factors in creating a sense of nostalgia both in the U.S. and in Europe and that, instead of concentrating on the plaza as a focal point, the emphasis is precisely on landmarks and on the disappearance of the famous “Main Street.” The Latin American context is notably different, since nostalgia has to do with that foundational place of the city whose focus is precisely *el Centro* and that comes closer to what Lefebvre conceptualizes as *oeuvres*: that is, the city prior to industrialization, defined by works of art and monuments, that has always been the center of valuable exchanges, with a contrast between wealth and poverty, between the powerful and the oppressed, without this having diminished a sense of affiliation towards the city itself.

La historia del baúl rosado, the directorial debut of Libia Estella Gómez,³ is a crime story that revolves around the discovery of the lime-covered body of a young girl in a trunk. The corpse was being shipped as a package and, when it does not reach the addressee, returns to Bogotá. The discovery unleashes a greedy desire in Detective Rosas (Álvaro Rodríguez) to find out the details of the crime and its outcome in order to sell the information to a journalist (Fabio Rubiano). Opposing them is Detective Corzo (Edgardo Román), who not only battles the commercial zeal of tabloid journalism and Rosas’ interference but also the challenge of keeping himself celibate, a promise he made to his dead mother. This is made more difficult by his apparent attraction to Martina (Dolores Heredia), a widow who inherits the café that serves as the site of meetings and mix-ups for the group of men that dominates the narrative. Eventually Martina loses possession of the café and, with no future in the city, decides to leave.

By having the object in the trunk be the corpse of a little girl, and by giving a kind twist to the stereotype of the *femme fatale* as she is incarnated by Martina, Gómez breaks the rules of the game to offer a variation on common themes that revolve around clearing up crimes in the dark urban setting. Martina is far from being the devourer of men, the woman who is treacherous, neurotic or sexually promiscuous: common female stereotypes in the *noir* genre that have resulted in much analysis in feminist theory. The overall plot and the relationship between Corzo and Martina do not suffer from a lack of suspense but from a lack of climax and resolution. One of the assets of the film is to recreate the city’s atmosphere in the 1940s, making use of costuming and a couple of automobiles from the times, a burnt umber

overtone for the night scenes and a balance between the use of black and white and color to accompany a set design that—as in Ospina’s *Soplo de vida*—tries to be quite orthodox in applying the aesthetic conventions of the genre.

As an axis for an urban cinematic narrative, the *Bogotazo* (the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9th, 1948, which worsened the bipartisan political violence that the country was already experiencing) has only been dealt with in Jaime Osorio’s *Confesión a Laura* (*Confessing to Laura*, 1991). Unlike that film, *La historia del baúl rosado* does not revolve around that event, which constitutes the greatest political schism in twentieth-century Colombian history. Nevertheless, the strained political atmosphere of the 1940s is evident in several sequences. Speeches by Gaitán are heard in the background and his image appears on the walls of a public plaza recreated at the Chorro de Quevedo, the contested foundational site of Bogotá, close to the Eastern Hills of Monserrate and Guadalupe which are the city’s most famous landmarks. Similarly, mentioning the liberal leader’s name causes great tension and division among the journalists. As in today’s context in which the media are subject to becoming slaves to ratings, the reporters are torn between a serious approach to events or the option of sensationalism, not only with regard to the political divide that Gaitán represented in his day but also with regard to the ghoulish fascination unleashed by the discovery of the corpse.

The special care taken in recreating the dark and prudish Bogotá of those years leads Gómez to incorporate locations primarily from the old Candelaria sector, where the number of colonial houses dwindled in the 1960s, the 1970s and part of the 1980s as the sector progressively succumbed to visible state neglect in preserving the country’s architectural heritage. The creation of La Candelaria Corporation and later the Bogotá Institute of Cultural Patrimony (Instituto Distrital de Patrimonio Cultural) has greatly contributed to the revitalization of the zone. In her restoration of that decade, Gómez makes the most of places like the Chorro de Quevedo Plaza, the exterior of the Church of San Francisco and the Church of the Virgen del Carmen, the Savanna Train Station (Estación de Trenes de la Sabana), Rivas and Hernández Alleys (Pasaje Rivas and Pasaje Hernández) and the Leopoldo Rother Museum of Architecture at the National University, which serves as the prefecture building. The museum does not form part of the city’s *Centro*, but its 1940s architecture could be fitted out for the film’s purposes. Spruced up for the movie, these locations renew a sense of nostalgia for the Bogotá of years past. Although it may point to a yearning for different referents, as a perennially constituent element of the urban *noir* set, nostalgia and its relation to memory is a point of intersection between the Latin American city and the group of *noir* films that Dimendberg analyzes. For Dimendberg, the nostalgic effect that 1940s and 1950s films have on movie buffs is a nostalgia for an image of the city

that—to quote Kevin Lynch—is “rendered fragile by the passage of the twentieth century and unsatisfiable by the continued transformation of cities into centres of consumption and images of desirable ‘lifestyles’”(6). In *La historia del baúl rosado* (and even in *Soplo de vida*), the elements needed to achieve that nostalgia become artificial insofar as the set design must resort to reconstructing a city that is gradually disappearing. In both films, the representation of Bogotá with its emphasis on the *Centro* can be read as an act of persistence of memory that has become cinematic and that confirms the endurance of urban memory in the face of the city’s changes. In *La historia del baúl rosado*, however, the closing sequence winks at the spectator by abruptly depicting an image of contemporary Bogotá. In this sense, the film narrative becomes a spectral memory of the old city.



Church of San Francisco (Calle 13 and Carrera 7) in *La historia del baúl rosado* (Photo courtesy of Libia Gómez)

Due to its sardonic tone more typical of a “black comedy,” *La gente de La Universal* does not employ nostalgia as a means of yearning for the oldest urban forms. This is a complex story of deceptions, extortions, and infidelities in which the domestic sphere and the family circles emulate different levels of corruption from the public sphere. From prison, Gastón Arzuaga (Ramiro Guerrero) hires the personnel from the barely solvent Universal detective agency to spy on his lover (not his wife) when he suspects that she is having an affair. Likewise, Fabiola (Jennifer Steffens), the wife of Diógenes Hernández (Álvaro Rodríguez)—the boss at

Universal—is unfaithful to him with his colleague, employee and nephew Clemente Fernández (Robinson Díaz).

La gente de La Universal premiered in 1994, one year after Sergio Cabrera's celebrated *La estrategia del caracol*, and the majority of the press reviews did not take long to point out the parallels between them, especially due to the setting in the *Centro* and the scrounging and survival economy (*el rebusque*) that they both depict. In her more extensive reading of Bogotá, Alejandra Jaramillo elaborates on the aforementioned comparison with regard to her theory that such films represent the *Centro* as "espacio ridiculizado, como caricatura de la ciudad antigua, moderna y en progreso, constituye una deconstrucción de la función logocéntrica del centro urbano" (54) (a ridiculed space, as a caricature of the old city, modern and in progress, [that] constitutes a deconstruction of the logocentric function of the urban center). The idea that the *Centro* has been "caricatured" in *La gente de La Universal* persists not only here but also in various print reviews of the film. To the contrary, *La gente de La Universal* presents an urban narrative that is determined to record the city's chaos by means of a more sordid and less caricatured vision than that of *La estrategia del caracol*. More than any other Colombian film, *La gente de La Universal* offers a criticism of the absence of infrastructure that can be applied to the cartography of other great Latin American cities. The particular stamp that makes its location in Bogotá conspicuous is the distribution and displacement of the narrative, emulating the *Centro*'s original expansion towards the north. The narrative spreads itself among three specific locations that have a special connection both to the city's *Centro* and to the proliferation of other *centros*, creating another cartography, one of decentering, that shows how corruption and a lack of infrastructure are not solved by leaving the city's *Centro* behind as the locus of financial decisions and the axis of dispersion and entertainment; rather, corruption and the lack of infrastructure are disseminated as the logocentric order of the city is broken. In the end, the Historic Downtown continues to be the country's epicenter of power since the National Capitol, the various Ministries, the Office of the Mayor of Bogotá, and many other state buildings are located there.

The three locations in question are: the former building of *El Espectador* newspaper at the corner of Jiménez Avenue (Calle 13 and Carrera 5, a partially rounded building reminiscent of Erich Mendelsohn's Schoken Stores [Stuttgart 1930] and Mossehaus [Berlin 1922]); the area that is still known as the International Center (around Calle 26 to Calle 32; between Carrera 7 and Caracas Avenue); and, finally, Chile Avenue (Calle 72), the city's modern-day financial district. It should be noted that the checkerboard structure mentioned previously has functioned since the city's founding on the basis of a grid composed of *calles* and *carreras* (with the exception that "avenues" can be one or the other). The *carreras* are oriented north-south and the streets run from east to west. From the *Centro* towards the north, the

nomenclature is fairly consistent. This helps us to understand that the distribution of the locations for *La gente de La Universal* among these three spaces frames a series of internal borders that speak to the city’s transformation by factors such as the flow of capital and the relocation of the center of production of capital in the north (Figure 1).

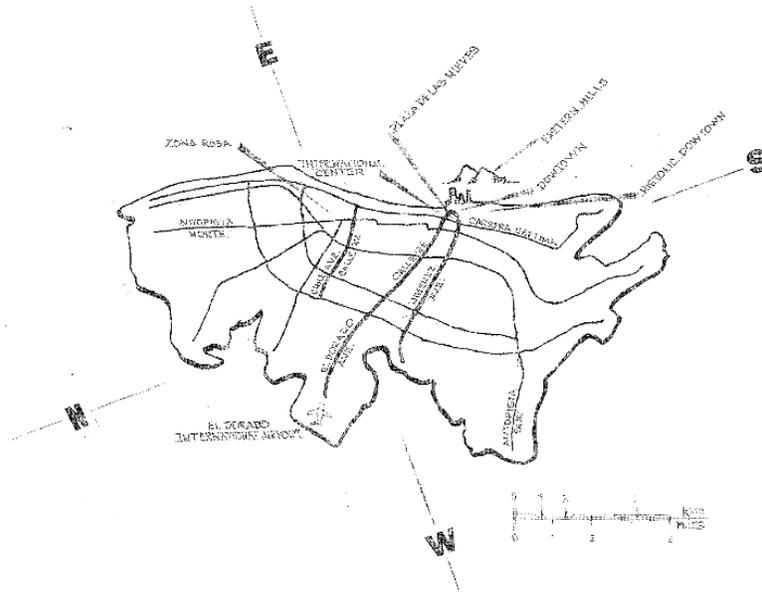


Figure 1: Map of Bogotá (César Carrillo)

The former building of *El Espectador* newspaper, with its location on Jiménez Avenue, marks the border between the Historic Downtown of Bogotá (the colonial city that is emphasized in *La historia del baúl rosado*) and the modern city. The reference to *El Espectador* (The Spectator) is not a gratuitous coincidence within the film’s narrative since spying and watching are central actions in the plot that turn Diógenes and Clemente into constant spectators. Not only does their course of action revolve around these two activities, but the film’s “spectator” ends up participating in a similar way. From the location at *El Espectador*, the action moves to the International Center and takes place in one of the Armed Forces’ buildings, the Bachué Building next to the Tequendama Hotel. Marisol (Ana María Aristizábal), Arzuaga’s lover, is spied on from there. In reality, the International Center was the former financial and hotel district in Bogotá, which has been displaced to Calle 72 and the surrounding area, a zone now characterized by glass facades, a growing number of international hotel chains, and an ample offering of national and foreign cuisine. It is at a bank on this avenue where

Arzuaga's relatives try to get the money to bail him out. Calle 72 not only frames a new point of reference for where the northern part of the city supposedly begins, but also delineates Bogotá's entry into the neo-liberal order. Before the rise of this zone, the Tequendama Hotel (adjacent to the historic San Diego zone) was the long-time emblem of Colombian tourism and, although its reputation as a privileged host for important international personalities may have diminished, it still acts as the bastion of a city center that refuses to give up its hierarchical position.

In this displacement from the *Centro* to the north, *La gente de La Universal* does not include a single location beyond the urban space between Calle 13 and Calle 72 (Jiménez Avenue and Chile Avenue, respectively), visually summing up the point where the colonial city ends and moving on to where the globalized city emblematically begins. Aljure does not seek out marginality or the city's liminal sectors since these are also located within the urban perimeter and not exclusively on the periphery. This distribution of the urban order reminds us that it is a city with many *centros*, which allows for the emphasis in *La gente de La Universal* to be placed on the circle of floating economies and various bureaucratic circles, creating a microcosm that reflects different levels of proclivity towards corruption among the State, politicians, and common citizens, and establishing clear ties between social violence and the underground networks of power.

The film's universe is constructed with attention to *double entendre* and exaggeration, a frequent tactic in portraying the popular sector in Colombian filmmaking. In *La gente de La Universal*, popular speech plays a determining role in creating a collection of references to nonexistent transactions: *chequecitos* (checks), *facturitas* (invoices), *firmas* (signatures), *recibitos* (receipts), *plata que va a entrar* (money coming in), and *adelantos* (advances)—including the meaningless *por eso le digo* (that's why I'm telling you) that Jaramillo points out in her discussion (61)—that express the indefinable nature of an economy characterized by whim, illegality, and operation outside the law, but also by uncertainty. This universe is also characterized by the idea of vigilance and supervision and the need to operate outside them: the National Museum, formerly the National Panoptic Building, is fitted out as a prison, and various sequences take place there that remind the spectator of the absurd nature of Colombian prisons: overcrowding, special privileges for some prisoners, and an epicenter of more criminal operations, thus underlining the anomalies of the justice system.⁴

Paradoxically, in *La gente de La Universal* Arzuaga is a Spanish prisoner serving a sentence for having killed one of Marisol's other lovers. Although the participation by foreign actors corresponds to the obligatory quota imposed on international collaborations (in this case, between Colombia, Spain, England, and Bulgaria), this film breaks with the tradition of incorporating the quota of foreign characters in positive or redeeming

roles while Colombian actors always take on the negative roles: Arzuaga is the vertex of the entire chain of corruption portrayed in the film. *La gente de La Universal* also breaks with various stereotypes about murder and constructs characters with the kind of moral ambiguity mentioned by Ospina. They earn the audience's sympathy because, far from censoring corruption and blackmail or offering an apology for those actions, the film ends up showing them as products of an ailing State where all institutions have a crack that makes it possible to avoid the law and ignore the function of rules, regulations, and statutes.

The emphasis on the detectives' domestic environment contributes to the emulation of the public sphere and is translated into what various newspaper reviews of *La gente de La Universal* associate with the nature of masculine characters motivated by "animal instinct," a *machismo* that is understood essentially as part of the idiosyncratic national character. The generalization can be risky, but the narrative does insist on *machismo* and plausible emasculation as part of the web of relationships that make up a certain type of masculinity in Latin America. Diógenes, Clemente, and Arzuaga, for example, are men who need to confirm their manliness at every moment. Their infidelity has to do with not letting themselves be "imprisoned" in a domestic space. On the other hand, there is a criticism of the hyper-masculinity that regulates that domestic space and that is invested in the masculine link between Diógenes and Clemente. Behind the apparent familiar camaraderie, there is a masked tension that allows for certain vigilance over the other's body and his signs of masculinity such as the capacity to control, spy, and investigate. The territoriality that these detectives establish over the business that unites them turns Fabiola's body into a scapegoat and creates their male bonding by means of homophobia and an exacerbated *machismo*. Clemente's "look" (semi-punk haircut and use of one earring) is the target of his uncle Diógenes' jokes making fun of his manliness; Fabiola's body becomes the object through which each man must confirm his own virility. Curiously, both Fabiola and Gastón Arzuaga are caged characters: Fabiola never leaves the Universal's house/office and Arzuaga becomes sexually impotent due to his imprisonment, becoming the object of homophobic jokes from some of the prisoners.

Finally, *La gente de La Universal* has a self-reflexive nature to which the element of urban space is not indifferently connected. On the one hand, the narrative explicitly alludes to components of the filmmaking apparatus and, specifically, to pornographic films: we have the porn star Marisol, interior and exterior shots of the theater where X-rated films are continuously shown and its box office, and the French producer, an associate of Arzuaga's, who is always on the verge of losing everything due to his filmmaking business. In a clear nod to his own *auteur* status, Aljure is mentioned as the theater's projectionist "Aljure, ponga el rollo cuatro" (Aljure, put on reel number four), the French producer shouts in one of the

scenes) and the director makes a small cameo appearance, Hitchcock-style, among the passersby who crowd around in the sequence on Clemente's shooting. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the National Museum was adapted to serve as the prison where Arzuaga is kept, and the choice constitutes a tacit *homage* to Colombian filmmaking. It was there, in the former National Panoptic Building, where Vincenzo and Francesco Di Domenico supposedly reconstructed the assassination of General Rafael Uribe, interviewing and filming those accused of his murder—Leovigildo Galarza and Jesús Carvajal—in the production of *El drama del 15 de octubre* (*Drama on October 15th*), the genesis of Colombian filmmaking. Finally, Arzuaga, with his Spanish surname, is not coincidentally an allusion to José María Arzuaga, the Spanish filmmaker whose avant-garde work brought elements of renovation with such productions as *Raíces de piedra* (*Roots of Stone*, 1963) and *Pasado el meridiano* (*Beyond the Meridian*, 1966), notably offering one of the first cinematic portrayals of Bogotá's urban changes in the 1960s.⁵

In *Soplo de vida*, Ospina brings together both his passion for and his knowledge of the *noir* genre. This suspense film with a fatalistic air to it keeps to the genre's conventions in a nearly orthodox way, following specifically in the footsteps of U.S. directors like John Houston and Billy Wilder and writers like Raymond Chandler; early essays on *film noir* characterized their work by its preoccupation with criminal psychology and the dynamics of violent death (Naremore 16–21). If Ospina was criticized at the time for his literal reproductions of scenes from classic *noir* films, it should not be overlooked that that same recycling is one of the genre's conventions, and it allows other films (usually also from the *noir* genre or from so-called *neo-noir*) to appear as pastiches, parodies, or direct references.

The application of *noir* conventions is easy to recognize in the making of this film. In an old hotel on the former Plaza de las Nieves, Golondrina/Pilar (Flora Martínez) is murdered. She had fled the ruins left by the eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in 1985 that devastated the town of Armero and wound up entangled with Medardo Ariza (Álvaro Ruiz), a politician on the campaign trail who has been implicated in murky dealings with a paramilitary group. Ariza heads the world of shady political deals, influence peddling, corruption, and abuse at the root of the whole story. Faced with his betrayal, Golondrina becomes both an angelic and a self-destructive woman who survives her tragedy in a kind of torpor and sexual ecstasy. All the men around her find in her a kind of mother, little girl, and lover. Detective Emerson Roque Fierro (Fernando Solórzano), a retired boxer named “The Hammer” López (Edgardo Román), a bullfighter in decline named José Luis Domingo (Juan Pablo Franco), a blind man (César Mora), and Medardo Ariza are all victims of their obsession with Golondrina. However, the stereotype of the *femme fatale* is split between the

character of Golondrina/Pilar—who seduces them and drags them down in the end—and her antagonist Irene Ariza (Constanza Duque)—who seduces the detective to achieve her own ends. Faced with her husband's disappearance, Irene, Ariza's sister, goes from being a housewife to running a casino and soon becomes a vengeful seductress who, in her role as antagonist, hopes to track down her husband (the bullfighter) and silence the investigation of Golondrina's death.

Common elements of the *noir* genre combine with elements of Colombian daily life such as abject poverty, violence, and natural disasters. The biblical quote from Genesis that opens the film and gives it its title combines with documentary footage on the tragedy at Armero to add a fatalistic dimension to the narrative. It is precisely that air that made *film noir* attractive to existentialist critics "because it depicted a world of obsessive return, dark corners or *huis-clos*" (Naremore 22). The references to clay and lava combine with the idea of ashes to create an omnipotent presence of death; indeed, the story is told by Fierro in the framework of his trip to Armero to spread Golondrina/Pilar's ashes.

The solitary detective's off-camera narration dominates the structure, in combination with flashbacks. These two techniques alternate along with changes from color to black and white respectively. The Plaza de las Nieves becomes the ideal location for a *mise-en-scène* that includes beggars, transvestites, prostitutes, and other quintessential characters from the heart of Latin American cities. Both the Plaza and its surroundings are also perfect for a *noir* set: stripped of the glamour that would have characterized it near the end of the nineteenth century (at that time it marked the edges of Bogotá's urban perimeter), now it is surrounded by dilapidated office buildings and dark, narrow streets. This facilitates setting up the genre's typical set design, including neon lights, Venetian blinds, and *chiaroscuro*. The characters' costumes contribute to the deliberately *noir* scenography: they are carefully chosen and perpetuate such classic items as the trench coat, the fur coat with padded shoulders—with which Irene tries to bribe Jacinto/María Félix—and Fierro's fedora that brings to mind Humphrey Bogart's classic look. More than merely a prop, it invests Fierro with "the dark emotional moods favored by Continental artists of the postwar decade" that in Naremore's view made the U.S. actor the epitome of what he himself labels the "Bogart thriller" (27).



El Mago (César Mora) in an interior shot at the hotel in *Soplo de vida* (Photo courtesy of Luis Ospina)

Within the complex, tangled webs that are woven among the characters, the most complicated game is established between gender and sexuality, specifically in the relationship between the investigator John Jairo Estupiñán (Álvaro Rodríguez) and Jacinto/María Félix (Robinson Díaz), a transvestite who manages (or perhaps owns) the hotel. As we saw in *La gente de La Universal*, this film deals once again with “imprisoned bodies,” since Jacinto is never shot in a single exterior space. Jacinto’s predilection for personifying the Mexican diva María Félix, to the delight of Estupiñán, and the diva’s poster that presides over his private space stamp the production with a “retro” nostalgia, reinforcing the idea along the way that *Soplo de vida* is a movie about other movies. This is also one of the best *camp* productions of Colombian cinema. Estupiñán incarnates the hyper-*macho* who tries not to allow his masculinity to be challenged or destabilized by his homoerotic relations with Jacinto/María Félix. The combination of violence

and *machismo*, in addition to the somber and sordid décor of Jacinto’s room, recalls the relationship between Pancho (Gonzalo Vega) and La Manuela (Roberto Cobo) in *El lugar sin límites* (*Place without Limits*) by Arturo Ripstein (Mexico, 1978). As David W. Foster proposes in his reading, homoeroticism can be hidden in a certain “male normative homosociality” that is latent in the brothel in *El lugar sin límites* (and in the hotel in *Soplo de vida*). Furthermore, the fact that Jacinto dresses as a woman solely for Estupiñán only apparently maintains the conventional binary opposition between feminine and masculine, which also happens in the relationship between Pancho and La Manuela (22–32). With Jacinto’s murder, not only does Estupiñán bury the truth about Golondrina’s death (Jacinto as a *voyeur* kills time in his tedious job by spying on her), but also—as in Ripstein’s film—he attempts to erase his homoerotic encounters and punishes the queer body by making it disappear. Outside Jacinto’s private space, the narrative offers no other clue as to whether Estupiñán is homosexual or bisexual, making his relationship with Jacinto more ambiguous.



Jacinto’s private space at the hotel, presided over by an image of Mexican diva María Félix (Photo courtesy of Luis Ospina)

While the movie does pay great attention to all the *noir* details, Ospina does not lose sight of the fact that it is not only a matter of collecting elements and conventions but also of employing a specific filmmaking strategy to put in place a certain view of the world. As Naremore proposes, *film noir* “has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies” (11). As a whole Ospina’s work has always been characterized by going somewhat against the tide of the dominant forms of Colombian cinematography: thus the orthodox nature and literal application of the *noir* genre in *Soplo de vida*. While in the 1950s *film noir* seemed to die out as neo-realism emerged (Naremore 21), in Colombian filmmaking, Ospina opts for the genre’s conventions in response to his disinterest in a hyperreal treatment of violence, marginality, and crime, a gesture that was already foreshadowed by his collaboration with Carlos Mayolo on *Agarrando pueblo: los vampiros de la miseria* (*Vampires of Poverty*, 1977), where they labeled such a cinematic approach as *pornomiseria*.⁶ At the same time, his particular cinematic exercise is a dissent from expectations about the type of filmmaking that ought to be done in Latin America, with a subject matter limited to marginality. As he affirms, “yo ya estoy más por un cine que sea estilizado, que sea expresionista, que no esté tan ligado a la realidad, que tal vez esté inspirado en la realidad” (“El cine no paga” 99) (I’m really more in favor of a type of filmmaking that’s stylized, expressionist, not as tied to reality, [yet] perhaps inspired by reality). The current renewal of subject matter and form that is taking place in Colombian cinema owes a great deal to Ospina’s former adventures in filmmaking.

Given the extensive relationship between literature and *film noir*, it is not surprising that *Perder es cuestión de método* is adapted from a novel, in this case a detective novel by Santiago Gamboa. The novel has an ambitious structure, and Cabrera attempts a strict adaptation with a script that is incapable of letting go of the elements that made the original novel weighty. With this incursion into the *noir* genre, the director seems incapable of deciding between a mystery and a simple screwball comedy. The discovery of an impaled body on the outskirts of Bogotá drives the plot. The colonel assigned to the case (Carlos Benjumea) calls in his chits with newspaper reporter Víctor Silanpa (Daniel Giménez Cacho) to involve him in the investigation. Silanpa strikes up a friendship with Emir Estupiñán (César Mora) and with Quica (Martina García), a young prostitute, and they end up dismantling a complicated web of corrupt politicians and businessmen who move about against the backdrop of Bogotá and its outskirts. Gamboa’s novel and Cabrera’s adaptation are organized around other forms of violence that also make up and affect the country. As in *La estrategia del caracol*, Cabrera returns to the question of urban landownership, now taking on a case of corruption that involves the ownership of some urban plots of land

acquired in murky dealings with an emerald trader. Significantly, in the novel (although not in the film adaptation), in a reference to the antagonist Heliodoro Tiflis (Humberto Dorado), Estupiñán reminds Silanpa that “los esmeralderos también son mafia, jefe, aunque hoy ya nadie se acuerde” (Gamboa 172) (the emerald traders are also a mafia, boss, even if nowadays nobody remembers it anymore).

A step forward in Cabrera’s cinematography in this production is his creation of various panoramic views and wide-angle shots of Bogotá, which serve the purposes of this discussion precisely because they capture an image of modern-day Bogotá’s metamorphosis. As in *La gente de La Universal* and *Soplo de vida*, Bogotá becomes the setting *par excellence* for murders, cases of corruption, and intrigues associated with nepotism and political influence peddling; here, however, the city’s *Centro* is not the primary space in which to set them. In *Perder es cuestión de método* there is a greater preoccupation with showing the Bogotá that resulted from the transformations brought about by the Mockus and Peñalosa mayoralties (the Transmilenio mass-transportation system is shown ubiquitously, for example). The camera is repeatedly positioned in spaces that speak to the improvement in the citizenry’s quality of life, if we define “citizenship”—keeping in mind Nestor García Canclini’s discussion in *Consumers and Citizens*—in terms of acquisition and consumption. The critic invites us to consider “if consumption does not entail doing something that sustains, nourishes, and to a certain extent constitutes a new mode of being citizens,” and proposes that (with Jean-Marc Ferry in mind), if the answer is affirmative, “it becomes necessary to accept that public space overflows the sphere of classical political interactions. ‘Public space’ is the ‘mediated,’ ‘mediatory’ frame in which the institutional and technological mechanisms endemic to postindustrial societies present the multiple aspects of social life to a ‘public’” (26). Unlike the other three productions, *Perder es cuestión de método* emphasizes those elements of Gamboa’s original novel that concentrate on this new conception of public space in the Latin American megalopolis and its relation to citizenship and consumption: bars, shopping centers, night clubs, private nudist resorts, and swingers’ clubs, for example.

Those spaces are balanced against locations from the *Centro*, organized at random and failing to retain any reminder of the old city’s order: the narrow street leading to Quica’s apartment, the Central Cemetery, the police station, the psychiatric hospital, and the Church of St. Ignacio, for example. The wide-angle shots that capture the city from the Avenida Circunvalar (an avenue around the periphery that adjoins the eastern hills, a quintessential element of the panoramic view of Bogotá) offer a sense of the modern-day extension of the city and of its development. The route taken by Cabrera’s camera in this film shows that for some time now, Bogotá’s traditional cartography in which “north” is associated with the rich and “south” with the poor has been challenged by a new urban model that erases that division.

Nostalgia for the European city and the reproduction of the “American lifestyle,” evident in Bogotá’s Zona Rosa and in other upper-class sectors of the city, are now confronted with old urban ills such as inclusion vs. exclusion, nomadism, and the displacement that results from the country’s chronic violence.

In *Perder es cuestión de método*, two narratives on the treatment of the human body and its relation to space take on importance. The first has to do with the discovery of the impaled body, which is not only a literary and film reference to Dracula and to subsequent implications of torture and vampirism, but is also a reminder of the history of cruel assassinations in the long saga of various forms of violence in Colombia.⁷ Along with the image of the impaling, other supporting components within the semantic field of “annihilation of the body” are the exhumation of Estupiñán’s brother’s corpse and the numerous references to illnesses such as hemorrhoids, leprosy, mental illness, and obesity that afflict various characters and that underline the disintegrating nature of the body and the debasement to which the ailing body is subject.

The second narrative has to do with the relationship between space, body, and consumption. The idea of the *muñeco* (dummy) alluded to the dead body in *parlache*, the outcasts’ slang that is central to Gaviria’s films and the subject matter of *La virgen de los sicarios* (*The Virgin of the Assassins*), in both Fernando Vallejo’s novel and the film adaptation by Barbet Schroeder. In *Perder es cuestión de método*, the *muñeco* is recontextualized in the mannequin that accompanies Silanpa, with which he holds ongoing conversations. While Silanpa’s body gradually suffers the physical consequences of his search to clear up the murder, the mannequin is gradually dismembered as his private space is invaded by his antagonists. The remains of the mannequin frame the final encounter between Silanpa and Quica, whose friendship begins as a sexual transaction but becomes an alliance of solidarity. The image of the mannequin in the process of breaking down contrasts with a discourse on luxurious foodstuffs and with Colonel Moya’s preoccupation with his weight. Indeed, that discourse is incorporated in a diegetic way in the closing sequence—the Colonel’s initiation into the “Last Supper” sect, which promises weight loss through reading the Bible—and in the allusion to “Paradise Lost,” the name of a sect of nature enthusiasts and nudists who meet next to the granary where the impaled body is found. Together, these references reveal a tension among individuals who are dazzled by a consumerism that offers balms and cures for body and soul, while they coexist surrounded by and on the lookout for a savage urban violence.

Put in perspective, the attention to Bogotá’s *Centro* in the first three films and its decentering in the last synthesize many of Bogotá’s metamorphoses, at the level of ideology and at the level of spatiality as well as in the relation between individuals and the urban environment. Going

beyond the anecdotal tone that surrounds much of film criticism in Colombia, an examination of the city's representation in these films uncovers other meanings that are encapsulated there. Speaking about Bogotá's culture of fear, Jesús Martín-Barbero warns, "Those of us who study the labyrinths of urban culture do not limit ourselves to seeing only the injustice of the incessant reproduction of crime in violence. We see something else, something that leads us to consider not murder *in* the city but the murder *of* the city" (27). The production of historical meaning in these films relates somewhat to the archival value that Dimendberg finds in U.S. *film noir*: it reintroduces forgotten fragments of the city into public consciousness, it functions as an *aide-mémoire* for a culture whose spatial environment is undergoing dizzying changes, and it becomes like a memory bank that allows the spectator to remember urban forms that are disappearing (10).

Just as the adaptations made to the National Museum function like a palimpsest over the former National Panoptic Building, it is possible that some of the locations utilized here may survive the city's transformations by becoming other signifiers; others may resist change and still others may disappear. Although various gentrification projects in the *Centro* have been undertaken, resulting in expensive housing for high income citizens, the inexorable direction of the Latin American city seems to be towards gated communities and American-style suburbanization that gradually transforms the small towns adjacent to the cities into residential complexes. Due to this voracious displacement towards what was once rural, the disputed plots of land in *Perder es cuestión de método* are located on the outskirts of the city (near Teusa Lake), unlike in *La estrategia del caracol* where the struggle is over a construction site in the San Víctorino sector in the Historic Downtown (street vendors from the zone were eradicated during Peñalosa's administration and San Víctorino became a pedestrian plaza).

Turning back to the *Centro*, there are still some working offices in the building where *El Espectador* newspaper was, and recently a famous chain restaurant opened on the first floor. The fact that the traditional Lerner Bookstore is still holding out on the ground floor of a building next to it has kept the place vital. For a long time the building across the street housed the Intercontinental Hotel (which was owned by the proprietors of the Tequendama Hotel), and now there are plans to convert the abandoned building into fancy lofts. Along with everything else, the failed project to build the second tower of the Hilton Hotel in the International Center (the famous Éxito supermarket chain has now purchased the building) throws into doubt the viability of the Historic Downtown and the International Center to become axes for accommodations and services once again. Nevertheless, they continue being centers for work and for much daily movement.

In this discussion of film and urban transformation, the simple example of the fate of the movie theaters that have appeared in some of these films illustrates the endemic abandonment of spaces in the *Centro* that eventually could have become part of Bogotá's architectural and cultural patrimony. The former Lido Theater, used for exterior shots of the box office in *La gente de La Universal*, nowadays is a branch of the Colpatria Bank (which has rescued various theaters from ruin, both in Bogotá and in Medellín). The Mogador Theater, used for location shots in *Soplo de vida* in the sequence where the detective hides out in the movie theater, is now closed and up for sale. In 2004 the Central University Foundation acquired the Faenza Theater, used for interior shots, in an attempt to bring it back as the headquarters of its film club (one of the oldest in Bogotá).⁸ As multiplex cinemas abound in the city, these spaces are being left behind, protected by private enterprise or abandoned to the apathy of time.

Notes

1. Ten years after the cancellation of the National Company for the Promotion of Filmmaking (FOCINE), the 2003 Law on Filmmaking (Law 814) was promulgated with the intent to stimulate national film production and rectify faulty (and almost non-existent) policies on exhibition and distribution. Too complex to be summarized in a couple of lines, the law's main characteristics are its offer of incentives for private investment in Colombian filmmaking and its reliance on complex mechanisms designed to make Colombian film production part of the international industry. Today, the vitality of Colombian film production is undeniable, at least with regard to the number of films being made and their international visibility.
2. For my description of Mockus' work, I turn to the definition offered by Doris Sommer in her introduction to *Cultural Agency in the Americas*: "a term this book proposes to name and recognize as a range of social contributions through creative practices. Simply stated Mockus put culture to work" (I). In Peñalosa's case, it is worth recalling some of the emblematic projects of his administration, such as the establishment of the Transmilenio mass-transit system, the recovery of large zones of public space—including the controversial case of the Cartucho sector, also in the city's *Centro*—and the creation of bike paths, among other things.
3. It is worth noting that *La historia del baúl rosado* is only the third fictional feature film in Colombia directed by a woman. The other two are *Con su música a otra parte* (*Take Your Music Somewhere Else*, 1983) and *María Cano* (1990), both directed by Camila Loboguerrero. Gómez coincides with Loboguerrero in a large-scale approach to filmmaking that is uncommon in Colombian cinema. The director wrote the script in 1997 and had to wait almost ten years to complete the film, finally co-producing it with Mexico.
4. One would not have to look too far back in the history of Colombian prisons to understand the magnitude of this modest criticism, an indirect allusion that can encompass the famous "Cathedral" that drug-trafficker Pablo Escobar had built as his prison in negotiations with the government, or recent reports of access to the outside world and luxuries permitted to the paramilitaries in the "prisons" where they have been concentrated.

5. José María Arzuaga came to Colombia in 1960, leaving Spain under Franco. It could be said that the innovative character of Arzuaga's filmmaking lies in his attempt to bring Colombian cinema closer to neo-realism. The fruits of his labor will appear later in works by Jorge Silva and Marta Rodríguez and by Víctor Gaviria himself. With a more avant-garde approach to the camera, Arzuaga provided the first examinations of Bogotá's massification and urban development. Gaviria acknowledges that some of the low-angle shots and scenes from *Rodrigo D. No Futuro* are an explicit *homage* to Arzuaga. It is worth remembering that Felipe Aljure was Gaviria's assistant director on this film. With regard to *El drama del 15 de octubre*, only a couple of stills remain of the film and it survives through press clippings that testify to the scandal and discord provoked by the inclusion of the defendants.
6. Together with director Carlos Mayolo and writer Andrés Caicedo, Ospina formed part of a dynamic film movement in Cali, called "Caliwood." Mayolo and Ospina's mockumentary *Agarrando pueblo* criticized the boom in productions on the marginal sector in Colombia (and in Latin America) and culturally cannibalized poverty with visual productions that won famous international prizes while they gradually established a recurring subject matter in Latin American cinematography. In the 1980s, each director took up the theme of vampirism and zombies in his own way.
7. With regard to the body and violence in Colombia, in *Antropología de la inhumanidad*, María Victoria Uribe emphasizes the degradation of the body by dismemberment and massacre as expressions of generalized violence that are turned into particular elements in order to conceptualize violence in Colombia. Uribe traces the steps by which violence becomes "una acción mimética que se refiere a pistas de historia no canceladas y conflictos que nunca han sido resueltos" (*Antropología* 123) ("a mimetic action that refers to historical tracks that have not been wiped out and conflicts that have never been resolved"). For the author, each manifestation of violence repeats methods and scenarios from "La Violencia," and in the same way, "La Violencia" already carried with it consequences from the nineteenth century as well as from the War of a Thousand Days.
8. My thanks to Libia Estella Gómez and to Luis Ospina for clarifying the locations of their films and to Rito Alberto Torres and César Carrillo for consulting on locations and on Bogotá's urban transformations.

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