

Allegorical Cities: Bodies and Visions in Colombian Urban Cinema

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Filmic mapping

This paper compares two Colombian films, *Rodrigo D. No futuro* by Víctor Gaviria and *La estrategia del caracol* by Sergio Cabrera,¹ in an attempt to show how, in their different ways, they try to map the lines of intersection between body, screen, and social space. Both films are set within a cityscape which provides an allegorical backdrop for a visible politics of space, from the dissolution and recombination of (local) place under the speculative flows of economic (and cultural) capital, to the decorporealization of space within the aggressive (global) realm of visualization and the simulacrum. In order to theorize these links, I employ some of the categories for the analysis of social and urban space developed by the French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre and extended by cultural geographers such as David Harvey and Derek Gregory. The resonance (or coincidence) of these analyses with the thinking of Gaviria and Cabrera is, I believe, quite striking. Moreover, and perhaps beyond Lefebvre's insistence on the dictatorship of the image, both of their films seem to link processes of envisioning to the projection of an enigmatic, faintly sketched blueprint for resistance.

I begin with four quotations taken from four very different cultural contexts. The first comes from Doris Lessing's sweeping portrait of British society from the postwar period through to the 1960s and beyond, *The Four-Gated City*:

Joe's mother had lived in this street since she was born. Put her brain together with the other million brains, women's brains,

that recorded in such tiny loving anxious detail the histories of window sills, skins of paint, replaced curtains and salvaged baulks of timber, there would be a recording instrument, a sort of sixdimensional map which included the histories and lives and loves of people, London a section map in depth.²

The second, an amalgam of two quotations in fact, comes from the Colombian poet and film director Víctor Manuel Gaviria, writing in the 1980s about his "reenvisioning" of the art of cinematography:

El pulso del cartógrafo está hecho de muchas manos. Cada cual mete la suya, cada cual enseña las líneas de su mano y contribuye así a configurar al cabo de los trazos un mapa invisible.³

[A]llí en la pantalla, [escucharemos] todo lo que ahora oímos sin prestarle atención: canciones de escuela, ruidos de patio, declaraciones de novios en los barrios [...] Algún día, pienso, escucharemos en la pantalla las palabras menores. El ronroneo de los camiones que marchan por la autopista hacia la costa, luces amarillas que avanzan hablándose en voz alta.⁴

Two things, for me, bring these first two images of mapping together. First of all, both of the recording instruments imagined here, a pooling of feminine minds in Lessing's case, and a collaborative cinematic tracing in Gaviria's, are attempting to *reconfigure* cartographic space, to imagine *other* mappings not invested in the abstract, apparently nontropic two-dimensional space of the mapmakers and the city planners, nor in the modern-cum-postmodern regimes of perspective, visibility, and, of late, simulation, for which the screens of cinema and video themselves act as powerful synecdoche. Secondly, the *other* cognitive and invisible mappings envisaged by Lessing and Gaviria are sedimented from the flowing histories of organic bodies, whether they be synaptic engrams of histories, lives, and loves, compounded in unrepresentable dimensions (a six-dimensional map, we are told), the lifelines etched into the hands of the drawers of Gaviria's invisible cinematic maps, or "las palabras menores," the microstories, those fleeting experiences of everyday life that somehow fail to signify within the visual regimes, whether of modernity or of cinema itself. In these reconfigurations, the body is conjoined to space, precipitating a somatics of place which, as we shall see, runs counter to the displacement of bodies by the hypermediated images of the postmodern condition.

The third quotation alludes to this last point, and comes from the French Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre:

Living bodies, the bodies of 'users' are caught up not only in the toils of parcellized space, but also in the web of what philosophers call 'analogons': images, signs and symbols. These bodies are transported out of themselves, transferred and emptied out, as it were, via the eyes: every kind of appeal, incitement and seduction is mobilized to tempt them with doubles of themselves in prettified, smiling and happy poses; and this campaign to void them succeeds exactly to the degree that the images proposed correspond to 'needs' that those same images have helped fashion. So it is that a massive influx of information, of messages, runs head on into an inverse flow constituted by the evacuation from the innermost body of all life and desire.⁵

Lefebvre's stark description of the cancelling out of the body, its emptying into images, scanned lines, and data structures, helps us understand why, in trying to think, imagine, project the relationship between the human body and its urban environment at the end of the twentieth century, the screen of the cinema becomes somehow paradigmatic. The cinematic body, too, is emptied out, literally "through the eyes," into the realm of pure image, and its projection on screen *at this particular time* seems to bear some allegorical relationship to the hypermediation of postmodern society, the alienation and exaltation of being caught up in the web of images, signs and symbols which permeate the totality of urban social space, from high-class shopping mall to shanty town. Yet in amongst this phantasmagorical shadowplay of images flits a nostalgia for full embodiment, the desire for some representational space, that the traces of these transient bodies might impact on social space, make their mark in some indelible way, as if shadows, light and dark, could etch themselves into history. In the light of this last quotation, I shall argue that the precarious disposition, indeed disposal of bodies in the shadow cities of Colombian urban cinema is gesturing towards some *other* representational space, one which Gaviria's and Lessing's mapping machines would wish to record. Yet this is a gesturing whose allegorical *topos* serves, by virtue of its very "brokenness," not only to shatter the mimesis by which the social relations of production are reproduced and fetishized as "second nature," but also, I think, to spatialize the selfregarding narratives of "history," "progress," and "development." For, if the spatiality and even the economics of representation seem to inhere tantalizingly in the very etymology of the

word allegory, the *alle agora*, the *other* market or forum in which allegorical speech strives to take place, then allegory as a defetishizing cinematic trope and mode of enunciation uniquely maps aesthetic form onto the socio-economic spatial practices of global capitalism at the end of the Second Christian Millenium.

As a final quotation to end this introductory section, I simply cite the testimony of Antonio, a Medellín streetgang leader killed by vigilante death squads, recorded by Alonso Salazar in his harrowing book, *No nacimos pa'semilla*:

The city at night is fabulous, it's all light and darkness. Look closely at the yellow lights, and they turn into all colours, they spread upwards until they make a rainbow in the night. Then they're like a huge cascade of white water that is falling and falling into a deep, invisible well. [...] *The city at night is a screen, a lot of images that flash in front of your eyes.*⁶

Political frames

Sergio Cabrera's popular film of 1993, *La estrategia del caracol*, has been hailed as something of a renaissance for Colombian cinema. The film deals with an apparently familiar urban situation: the eviction of a group of working-class residents from one of the semiderelict houses in the old centre of the capital city, Santafé de Bogotá. Progressively abandoned by the rich in the aftermath of the 1948 *Bogotazo*, which launched the bloody period known as *La Violencia* in Colombia, the central backwater of La Candelaria (only a few streets away from the Presidential Palace) is now home to working-class tenants and squatters, visited only reluctantly by the well-to-do (who reside to the north of the city) in order to frequent the few state and government offices which remain there. This clear social and historical segmentation of space, with its lines of power running literally from north to south, provides the constant backdrop of the film's action.

A rich property speculator, Doctor Holguín (Víctor Mallarino), whose sumptuous offices on the northern slopes of Bogotá overlook the city from a great height, attempts to repossess the house in the centre which, although neglected, has been in his family for generations, with the stated aim of restoring its status as a "monumento nacional," (0:18)⁷ although more probably in order to sell it to property developers. He had previously repossessed the neighbouring house, "la Pajarera," whose residents had been evicted after a violent shootout with police. After the introductory credits, the film starts fittingly with an establishing shot of the Bogotá cityscape taken

from the mountainside overlooking the south of the city, followed up by an introductory sequence showing a roving television news team interviewing the victims of an eviction which we subsequently learn is taking place some 6 years after the main action of the film. Gustavo Calle Izasa (Luis Fernando Múnera), otherwise known as the *culebrero*, but in and introduces himself as one of the participators in "la legendaria gesta popular de la Casa Uribe." Taking charge of the interview, he proceeds to tell the story of his involvement in that episode, and the shot of him speaking blacks out to signal the start of an extended flashback which, except for the occasional reversion to the present of narration at a few intervals during the film, embeds the entire story, forming a temporal and fictional frame that is directly and selfconsciously related to the cinematic frame itself.

The confrontation between the tenants of "la Pajarera" and the legal apparatus of the state ends in tragedy, with the accidental shooting of a child. Some weeks later, when it is the turn of the nextdoor neighbours in "la Casa Uribe," rather than armed confrontation, the residents opt instead for a form of peaceful resistance and, aided by an ageing Spanish Republican anarchist, Don Jacinto (Fausto Cabrera), who had emigrated to Colombia as a refugee from Franco's Spain, they adopt a seemingly useless yet dignified "snail's strategy." This strategy consists of provoking legal delays, with the help of the comically played student lawyer *El Perro Romero* (Frank Ramírez), whilst surreptitiously transporting, by means of an ingenious funicular system of cranes, ropes, and pulleys, the entire contents *and fabric* of the building, with the exception of the façade, to a new plot of land which they have purchased collectively on the slopes overlooking the city. Parallel to this main plot is a sympathetic yet comic portrayal of the life and frustrations of Gabriel/Gabriela (played by Cabrera's wife, Florina Lemaitre), a crossdresser and resident of the house, who ends up enacting (literally) a clever and self-empowering role in the film's climax. This exhilarating tale, with its use of the storyteller figure in the form of the vociferous Paisa *culebrero* who recounts the entire story of the film to the television camera,⁸ is a celebration of local resistance, both political and gendered, to the normative flows of speculative finance, of the ability of ordinary people to claim some *representational space* of their own within the homogenizing and abstract spaces generated by finance capital.

La estrategia del caracol is able to project a utopian relationship of cinematic envisioning to popular spaces of representation precisely, I would argue, because of its (self-conscious) status as a fiction. Sergio Cabrera himself explains that the strategy of dismantling the "Casa Uribe" and transporting it by means of towers and pulleys only functions as a cinematic blueprint for social resistance — "esta gesta epopéyica popular," as the

culebrero puts it (1:46)— precisely because it is self-consciously enveloped within illusion, performance, and storytelling: "Esa es una de las razones por las que yo decidí utilizar el personaje del narrador, que es un *culebrero*, un hombre que tiene fantasías. Él es quien cuenta la historia y vemos lo que cuenta, es verdad que lo cuenta pero no tiene por qué ser exactamente real."⁹ This fictive framing, the embedding of the entire film as a story told to a *television news camera*, also serves, then, to "frame" the film's politics in allegorical fashion, to open the political arena onto other fora, other spaces of envisioning, which is in fact one of the film's main concerns. In this sense, the film takes a clearly postmodern line in relation to its politics: those markedly modern(ist) political/revolutionary strategies of (armed) resistance to expropriation by capital are displaced and relativized within the film. The "serious" politics of left-wing dogma and ideology have lost their status as organizing narratives, and can no longer pretend to provide universal solutions to local problems. Cabrera, who himself spent some time within an armed communist guerrilla movement in Colombia after his return from China,¹⁰ explains how this critique of totalizing left-wing politics functions within the film:

La idea política de la película era también mostrar que la izquierda puede y debe ser más creativa filosófica e ideológicamente que andar siguiendo las mismas líneas y las mismas instrucciones de siempre. La izquierda colombiana y el partido comunista aprovechan este tipo de problemas como los desalojos para hacer proselitismo político pero con una actitud pasiva y vieja en el aspecto ideológico, siguiendo el viejo esquema. La película era un intento de mostrar que vale la pena tener soluciones nuevas y más creativas, y privilegiar un poco el concepto de la solución individual sobre la colectiva, organizativa (*Ibid.*).

Whether or not this failure of planned left-wing resistance is part of the triumph of the discourses and globalized economic practices of the capitalist regime of flexible accumulation is a question which cannot be answered here. Nevertheless, it is not the concept of *collective* action itself which is being criticized in the film (indeed, the strategy which the tenants adopt depends upon collective participation), so much as an ossified, dogma-ridden politics which cannot get beyond the formulaic application, in the name of an unvarying *telos*, of homogenized (and violent) solutions to disparate local experiences. The dogmatic left, like all the other social groups represented, is gently parodied within the film in the form of the initial reaction to the

"snail's strategy" by the organized communists within the group of tenants: "Pues allá los compañeros dicen, y yo pienso igual, que ésa es una solución poco ortodoxa porque corresponde a una posición de clase pequeña burguesa, de clara tendencia anarquista. Y porque de más es individualista y no contribuye al proceso" (0:30). The fact that the film deals in social types, in overtly allegorical fashion (the ageing anarchist, the earnest communists, the religious Señora, the transvestite, the student lawyer), itself suggests a discursive levelling or relativizing of value systems, but even more striking than this is the fact that the new "ludic" politics which the film attempts to envision is projected directly into the realm of the cinematic itself, insofar as it is bound up with a game of illusion and playacting, creative deception and storytelling.

Visibility, Bodies, and Space

Víctor Gaviria's landmark film, *Rodrigo D. No futuro*, produced some five years earlier than *La estrategia del caracol*, is a much starker account of the ghettoization and violence produced *as differential* by the dominant spatial practices, although it still contains a paradoxical attempt to reinstate the body even at the moment of its disappearance from the visible regime of social life. The film is set in what Manuel Castells might have termed a "shadow city":¹¹ one of the marginalized, self-constructed *barrios* on the slopes overlooking the central Colombian city of Medellín, settled originally by rural migrants displaced from the countryside during *La Violencia*. It is estimated that during this period of Civil War, from the mid 1940s to the late 1950s, some 200,000 Colombians lost their lives, caught up in ferocious bouts of political and social violence which provoked a mass exodus from country to city in an extremely rapid process of enforced urbanization. Many settler districts have now become established working-class enclaves, with others in a continual state of construction, but the repercussions of the Violence continue, coupled with the near-total lack of employment opportunities for the second and third generation youths, and it is this deprived and violent urban context that the film documents.

The film's subtitle, *No futuro*, was suggested by one of its actor-protagonists, "El Burrito" (Leonardo Favio Sánchez).¹² An untrained "real-life" actor (like all of the teenage boys in the film), he was killed in Medellín's street violence some eight months after the film's shooting. A similar fate befell a number of the other protagonists, and in its final version the film's credits give, by way of dedication, a sobering list of those who had been killed or murdered coincidentally with its production. This dedication expresses the hope that although the boys' lives have been drastically cut short, at least

their *images* might live on for the normal span of a human lifetime: "para que sus imágenes vivan por lo menos el término normal de una persona"(1:30). This idea is, I believe, central to the tensions between body and image, visibility and invisibility, decorporealized space and accelerated/annulled time, at the heart of the film's aesthetic and political discourse. The film does not have any linear "plot," since it deals in episodic fashion with the drifting lives of its teenage protagonists, but as its title suggests (a homage to de Sica's Italian neorealist classic *Umberto D.*),¹³ it centres around the daily life and eventual suicide of Rodrigo Alonso (Ramiro Meneses), a working-class, seventeen-year-old boy whose ambition is to start a punk music band. Rodrigo spends his days morosely searching for a set of drums, but is unable to find anyone willing to sell or lend, and in any case has no money, although he does get himself a pair of drumsticks. An intertwined set of narrative threads follows the fortunes and violently endangered lives of some of Rodrigo's friends, in particular the semiphilosophical Adolfo (Carlos Mario Restrepo), the highly *punkerizado* "El Alacrán" (Wilson Blandón), and sacrificial victim Ramón (Jackson Idríán Gallego), all of whom have become *pistolocos*, members of a street gang involved in robbery, violent crime, and drugs. Unlike the utopian projections of Cabrera's work, Gaviria's film does not attempt to offer any overt message or potential solution to the cycle of violence, poverty, and crime to which it is painful witness.

In a discussion of Nancy Scheper-Hughes's study of infant mortality in the slums of a sugar-plantation town in the Brazilian Nordeste, the science studies theorist Donna Haraway asks a series of disturbing questions about visibility and invisibility:

How is visibility possible? For whom, by whom, and of whom? What remains invisible, to whom, and why? For those peoples who are excluded from the visualizing apparatuses of the disciplinary regimes of modern power-knowledge networks, the *averted gaze* can be as deadly as the allseeing panopticon that surveys the subjects of the biopolitical state.¹⁴

It is a set of similar questions which, I think, the film *Rodrigo D.* raises in its audience: how can the cinematic image hope to trace a map of the social divisions of space which have rendered "invisible" those unmappable (human) places, the residual, scotomized bodies which are both produced and disavowed within urban systems of representation? How can a film whose very apparatus is immersed in regimes of visibility and invisibility trace the trajectory which propels those invisible bodies into a nullspace, a *no future*?

In the context of a whole generation of teenage boys whose lives are so

marked by violence (whether internecine or "administrative")¹⁵ that they rarely make it into their twenties, Gaviria's film ruthlessly displaces the 1970s British punk maxim "*No Future*" from its metropolitan and rhetorical status as First-Worldly-weary harbinger of nuclear apocalypse to become a startling allegory for the *invisible* violence underlying perhaps an unspoken condition of "our" postmodernity. This is how the director himself expresses the relationship of the film's subtitle to the homogenizing urban culture under the global postmodern regime of "flexible accumulation":

NO FUTURO es una máxima del punk en todo el mundo. Indica la amenaza de la guerra nuclear, pero sobre todo el abandono que en la sociedad postindustrial se tiene para todo aquello que no sea la imagen de un producto consumible, devorable. NO FUTURO es la máxima de lo que se ha llamado postmodernismo, el mundo de la publicidad, en donde todo se ha reducido a un enorme basurero. *El tiempo se ha detenido en un presente comestible*, en la inminencia del consumo. El presente en que vive el producto encerrado en su empaque al vacío, que de un momento a otro será comido, consumido, y luego será basura en el basurero de todas las cosas. *El pasado y el futuro están abolidos*. [...] En Medellín el NO FUTURO está regado por todas partes ("Un ojo de nadie," p. 4, my emphasis).

The postmodern culture of no culture generates a future of no future. The slogan "No Future" was most famously used in the Sex Pistols' controversial 1977 single, "God Save the Queen," which rhetorically emphasizes the link suggested here between a throwaway society and the abolition of both past and future.¹⁶ However, the eclipse of the bodies of those cynically termed "desechables" (disposables) by the Colombian bourgeoisie bears a far more literal and frightening relationship to this throwaway culture, so that this sense of "no future" is continually propelled into an image of the violent and reductive death which the boys both inflict on others and know that they will in all likelihood suffer themselves at the hands of the police or of vigilante "cleanup" squads.¹⁷ It is notable that the battered body of a victim is often referred to with black humour as a "muñeco," and the theme of the doll/dummy, a constant level of reference within the film, as we shall see, bears a clear relationship not only to a gruesome form of reification (and even "commodification"), but also to that dialectic of visibility-invisibility which would appear to be a defining characteristic of the postmodern obsession with image and surface phenomena. This will perhaps provide us with a blueprint for linking the precarious inscription of the body in the cinematic signifier to

those unstable landscapes of power caught between contradictory processes of agglomeration in place and dispersal over space impelled within a global urban system in which time itself, past, present, and no future, implodes onto space.

As David Harvey explains, Marx himself stressed, in a well-known formula, that since capitalism always aims to extract (from labour) the maximum surplus value in the shortest time (minimizing the turnover time of the production process), it is internally driven by the time-is-money equation to overcome impediments of space and distance through faster modes of communication and transportation: a process which he termed "the annihilation of space by time."¹⁸ Harvey argues that money, time, and space form an interlocking grid which frames the whole of social life as we know it within the urban capitalist system. This is because money itself has a unique dissolving power: it is of its very nature to dissolve spatial barriers (in fact money as symbol arises precisely from the need to establish equivalencies of exchange over time and space), as well as, under liberal capitalism, social barriers (innate distinctions of class, for example). The tendency towards dispersion over space is, however, in constant dialectical tension with the tendency towards accumulation of profit and agglomeration in place, leading to vertiginous cycles of overaccumulation and rapid devaluation and liquidation of fixed assets. Command over money, space, and time thus "form independent but interlocking sources of social power."

Yet Lefebvre consciously turns the Marxian formula on its head. He claims it to be a defining characteristic of *modernity* that traces of time, inscribed in natural space, are in fact made to "vanish" from social space (rather than space being annihilated by time): reduced to the surface of a clock, time is atomized, consumed, used up, and "spent." Present only as fragmented remains, the shards of time are swept away with the debris of the city, lest they clutter the freeways and hamper the free flow of commodities through space. The attempt to "spend" time, to shorten all lapses of time-in-space, propels modernity into an instantaneous, self-consuming and homogenized present, bereft of past and future, of memory and anticipation. In the transparent emptiness of this unencumbered space, desire is unleashed under the illusion of instant gratification, instant consumption, but this desire is hollow and empty: "desire encounters no object, nothing desirable, and no work results from its action. Searching in vain for plenitude, desire must make do with words [...]. Disillusion leaves space empty [...]. Spaces are devastated and devastating" (*Production*, p. 97).

The coincidence of these ideas with the thinking of Gavrila, his adumbration of a consumer society in which both consumers and consumed are displaced into a timeless void of empty desire, is, I hope, clear, and it is

fully borne out in *Rodrigo D.*. The film functions as a series of interlocking fragmented narratives that juxtapose the aimlessness of the boys' lives lived on the margins of a libidinalized social text that refuses to interpellate them as meaningful subjects with the spatially drawn lines of power that ghettoize and curtail their existence. In a typical early sequence, we see Rodrigo waking up in the morning and preparing for another day of unemployment, uselessness, and boredom (0:12). Through a series of establishing shots, the camera shows, in sequence: the view from Rodrigo's window onto a nearby incline; Rodrigo lying in bed, his eyes open at first and then slowly closing; a slanted view from the window with a glimpse of the urban sprawl below; a photograph of his family on the wall, with his mother (now dead) in the middle of the group; a brightly coloured punk drawing pinned on the wall showing a head with three faces and a nose ring; Rodrigo once more, his eyes closed, and then slowly opening; and his brother going to the bathroom. On the audio track we hear, recorded in direct sound, the noise of people getting up, distant sound of traffic and construction equipment, the general hustle and bustle of the house and neighbourhood. After a morose breakfast with his brother, Rodrigo goes, in his underpants, up onto the half-constructed roof terrace of his house to wash with rainwater from a drum (0:13). The view of Medellín city and suburbs spreading over the valley below provides a breathtaking backdrop to Rodrigo's half-naked, dripping body, in a literal juxtaposition of body and city which is echoed throughout the film. This scene is crosscut by shots of his sister tidying the living room while listening and singing along to romantic songs on a badly tuned radio station; she retunes the radio to hear the song more clearly and we hear her singing out the words "tu muñeca que soy". Cut to Rodrigo washing, to a loud background of traffic and neighbourhood noises; when he has finished, he pauses for a moment to look out over the city. Cut back to his sister mopping the floor of the living room and still singing, as the refrain of the song, sung by a female voice, rings out clearly:

Que soy tu muñeca// La que tienes arrastrándose a tus pies.// Tu
muñeca//Sí señor.¹⁹

Rodrigo, still dripping wet having come down from the terrace, walks straight across her newly cleaned floor. An animated argument ensues, in which his sister accuses him of being a useless layabout who does no work and never helps out at home; with highly colourful language, and some violent prods from her mop, she sends him packing out of the house (0:14). So begins another day on the streets, as Rodrigo wanders around in search of a set of drums to start up a band. Not himself involved in any street violence, the film takes Rodrigo's morose stroll through the outskirts of the city, often

accompanied by a heavymetal soundtrack ("Dinero, problema Dinero, sistema," 0:36),²⁰ as a structuring device which gradually builds up a picture of those peripheral bodies who have no claim to visibility other than aggression.

The link between a mass popular culture in which desire is continually bound to commodification and reification—as we see in the lyrics of the romantic song which encourage the woman to see herself as a *muñeca* (doll)—and the appearance at a number of points of a *muñeco* (dummy), the colloquial term which the boys use throughout the film for a battered, dead body, often found in rubbish tips, is of course a daring one, but one which this film dares to make. In fact, dead bodies, whether the anonymous body of a woman knocked down by a bus or lorry, lying in the middle of the road (0:25), the battered body of a prostitute (0:55), or the mutilated body of Johncito, kidnapped by vigilantes ("en un jeep sin placas") and turned into a *muñeco* (1:15), seem to act as visible and ominous signposts of an ultimate invisibility.

How can these devastated landscapes of power be linked to what Lefebvre calls "a logic of visualization," and more specifically with cinematic practice as an attempt to reappropriate representational space? One of the basic premises of Lefebvre's arguments is that modernity is structured around an aggressive, phallocratic visualization, in which knowledge is reduced to spectacle and display, and in which bodily experience—that which cannot be formulated visually—is devalued and rendered unknowable:

By the time this process [the rendering abstract of space] is complete, space has no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualization. It is thus—not symbolically but in fact—a purely visual space. The rise of the visual realm entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role.²¹

Moreover, Lefebvre appears pessimistic about the possibility of any practice based on cutting (fragmentation), montage (rearrangement), and the illusory projection of *images* doing anything other than collude with the parcellization and technocratic administration of space. He thus leaves little space within his own theory for a practice of visual contestation, or any attempt to reappropriate representational spaces through a medium he claims is "incriminated" because it belongs to the realm of images. Cinematic processes, he implies, inevitably partake of fragmentation while they project an illusion of continuity:

Where the error consists in a segmentation of space [...] and where the illusion consists in the failure to perceive this dismemberment, there is simply no possibility of any image rectifying the mistake. On the contrary, images fragment; they are themselves fragments of space. Cutting things up and rearranging them, *découpage* and *montage*, these are the alpha and omega of the art of imagemaking. [...] Wherever there is illusion, the optical and visual world plays an integral and integrative, active and passive, part in it. It fetishizes abstraction and imposes it as the norm. It detaches the pure form from its impure content, from lived time, everyday time, and from bodies with their opacity and solidity, their warmth, their life and their death. *After its fashion, the image kills* (p. 97, my emphasis).

This is, I would argue, *precisely* the paradox at the heart of Gaviria's aesthetic. Or rather, Gaviria's film, from its very outset, *lays bare* that remainder of body over image, the substitution and displacement of body by image, which is perforce the disavowed centre of all cinematic representation. Images kill in even more brutal a fashion than Lefebvre could have realized and the film's bald statement that the dead boys might somehow live on "for the normal span of a human lifetime" in its images is an indication that it is designed to confront the (living) spectators with precisely the (absent) solidity, warmth, opacity of these displaced, substituted, and "disappeared" bodies: "Cuando matan a alguno de ellos se crea un vacío tan grande que es como si al morir se volvieran invisibles."²² For those bodies are indeed forced to inhabit "a space dominated by the eye and the gaze,"²³ to which the cinematic apparatus bears a metonymic relationship. These interlinked panoptic spaces impose a dual imperative: if the only validated experiences are those which exist at the level of aggressive spectacle and performance, then it is unsurprising that a particularly aggressive "performance" of violence should accompany the claim to visibility of those whom bourgeois society seeks to render invisible. The following words of the twenty-year-old John Galvis (who would have played a leading role in the film had he not been killed a month before its shooting) makes this link clear:

Casi no he tenido oportunidad ni siquiera de ver buenas películas. Sino pura violencia, cosas así, fatales... Pero uno actuando es como robando... Yo cuando aprendí a robar, aprendí a actuar... Porque yo no me concebía a mí mismo atacando un tipo [...] En cambio cuando uno va a robar, tiene que identificarse con el ladrón. ¡Imagínate todo lo que yo

tendría que cambiar con vos (señalando a Víctor [Gaviria]), vos no me ves como el ladrón, imagináte todo lo que yo tendría que cambiar con vos para que me vieras como el ladrón! Entonces yo tengo que cambiar, totalmente, malicioso y tal, ¡tan!, ¡fun!: entonces te hago timbrar, te abordo y te asalto... ¡Entonces ahí está el drama, entiende, esa es la actuación!²⁴

Other commentators on the relationship between Medellín's consumer culture and the world of youth gangs (and contract killers) have taken this linking of visual culture, modernity, and violence even further: "The hired killers have absorbed the ephemeral sense of time that is typical of our day and age. Life is the instant. Neither past nor future exist. [...] The contract killers take the consumer society to its extremes: they turn life [...] into a commodity to deal in, into a disposable object" (Salazar, *Born to Die in Medellín*, p. 120). Salazar goes on to note some of the visual vocabulary employed by the boys, the most telling of which is the expression (used also in the film) for killing someone: "tomarle la foto." The phrase to take someone's snapshot captures precisely an unconscious link between the reification of the body at death, its reduction to dumb object (*muñeco*), and the eclipse of the somatic under the visual regimes of a (postmodern) consumer society.

Within this apparent emulation of (first-world) video culture, the ideology of punk and heavy metal plays a paradoxical role which sets apart the *punkeros* from the *pistolocos*. Coded for aggressive visual display and maximum shock value, punk represents both the outer limit *and inversion* of bourgeois consumerist culture, what Gaviria terms "una ideología del odio." This serves, for a brief moment, as a representation of the unrepresentable, an inversion of values which forces the commodity to recognize what is alienated within its self-reflective surfaces. If the world of fashion and commodity, the *centros comerciales* which increasingly serve as the only representation of "public" space for the Colombian bourgeoisie, is a world with no past and no future, then this displaced form of British punk and heavy metal, with its worship of death, violence, and decay, serves aggressively to make visible the suppressed annihilation of future as an image of death and destruction, perhaps in an attempt to reclaim some space of representation. From the midst of the social rubbish heap—that *other* forum—, where the broken-down commodity languishes in oblivion, where the unemployed attempt to "spend" time that is stuck in an eternal present, where life is as disposable as a wrapper, punk serves as a last-ditch spit in the face of commodity culture. In the film, as Rodrigo wanders from place to place in search of a set of drums—from the outskirts to the centre, from the roofs of half-constructed buildings to the top of a brand-new skyscraper—, his reaction to each refusal

he encounters is to spit. The trace of spit on the polished surface of the commodity, of the postmodern veneers, perhaps serves to tarnish, if only for a moment, the mirror of its *no future*.

Strategies of Fiction: Reappropriating Vision

I want now to return to *La estrategia del caracol*, to show how its fictive strategies are aimed not only at reappropriating physical space, but also, and more importantly, the modes and practice of spatial representation.

Both of the chronotopes of modernity and postmodernity, superimposed and out of phase, are clearly alluded to in this film, and they are in a sense iconized in the figure of the property speculator, Doctor Holguín. The scenes set in his sumptuous offices, with their huge plateglass windows located on a vantage point overlooking the rich north of Bogotá, provide a clear visual metaphor for the technocratic administration of urban space and its production/colonization by finance capital. If David Harvey sees the urbanization of capital as providing part of the "spatial fix" for the crises of accumulation that periodically rock capitalism, then this film, with its emphasis on urban "decay," spatial lines of power, and local resistance in the form of the tenants' struggle, dramatizes precisely those tensions which Harvey identifies at the heart of capitalism's spatial dilemma, forced to enact a precarious balance between "preserving the values of past commitments made at a particular place and time, or devaluing them to open up fresh room for accumulation."²⁵ At the same time, the fact that this takes place within an aggressively *visual* regime is clearly emphasized through a variety of motifs. Not only does the skyline viewed from these offices stand, metonymically, for the city itself, evoking Lefebvre's imposition of abstract space over the concrete space of everyday life, the scotomization of body and place, but Holguín is himself absorbed into mediatized images and visual networks, his power mediated, literally, through video and television.

This, I believe, is the meaning of the sequence in which we first encounter Holguín, after the violent eviction of the residents of his neighbouring property, "La Pajarera". His lawyer, Mosquera, sheepishly visits him in his offices to report on the messed-up operation (0:18). Instead of speaking to him directly, Holguín, who is talking on a cordless 'phone, turns on a video with a remote control, on which he has recorded, while shaving with a noisy electric razor, a tirade against Mosquera's incompetence:

Usted sabe muy bien que a mí la Pajarera me importa un bledo.
La casa Uribe es la que tengo palabreada. La Pajarera esa es
una pocilga. La casa Uribe, usted lo sabe perfectamente, es un

monumento nacional. Ahí nació mi tío, mi bisabuelo el arzobispo. [...] Yo de la Pajarera puedo negociar escasamente el lote. De la casa Uribe, puedo negociar la casa Uribe.

Mosquera responds to the video image as if it were Holguín, and the image appears to "answer" his objections. Halfway through the tirade, Holguín pauses the video to harangue Mosquera directly; he then resumes the video tape while he types information on a computer screen. This bizarre sequence creates a plane of continuity between the video image and the "real" Holguín, who is of course, for us, also a video or cinematic Holguín. The act of freezing or pausing the frame, then, acts as a self-conscious cipher for that substitution of body by image which underlies cinematic representation itself, making visible the unconscious "stills" that underlie the illusory continuity of the moving image. On a further level, this sequence makes clear some of the ways in which, under the globalized regime of flexible accumulation, bodies are materialized and dematerialized, transmitted as images, waves, and data structures on video and computer screens, forming devastating new constellations of space and power.

Given this hypermediatized context, it is unsurprising, perhaps, that Don Jacinto's strategy of resistance should be fought out within the terrain of illusion, fantasy, and performance. Don Jacinto first demonstrates the principles of his pulley system to the highly religious *Misia* Triana and the transvestite Gabriel/Gabriela in the amphitheatre of the Colonial Teatro Colón, where we assume he works (0:31); the tenants rely on a system of mirrors, codewords, and various deceptive tricks in order to carry out the strategy; *El Perro* Romero at one stage tries (and fails) to put in place a series of mirrors to create a mirage ("un espejismo") of the house, in a brief sequence which alludes to the specular processes at work within the cinematic signifier (1:17); Gabriel/Gabriela's ability to perform gender to perfection is put in the service of the strategy when she seduces the property owner's lawyer, Víctor Honorio Mosquera (Humberto Dorado), in order to delay the proceedings, so that she can later shame him by transforming herself publicly into Gabriel (1:32); and finally, the house is rapidly dismantled in the utmost secrecy until only the façade is left standing with a burlesque painted version of the house on the back wall overscribed with a graffiti-like message, "Aquí tienen su hijueputa casa pintada" (1:45). Each of these aspects of don Jacinto's strategy grafts politics onto illusion and performance in a way which reappropriates the realm of the visual, wresting it from the clutches both of modernity's panoptic equation of visibility and power, and of the "postmodern" market strategies of flexible accumulation, in which bodies dissolve into video images, packaged up as commodified simulacra. Although

this narrative makes its intervention on the level of image and performance, including gender performance, it does not forget the invisible, battered bodies that *Rodrigo D.* makes visible: Mosquera's solution to the delays provoked by Romero is to have him brutally beaten and left for dead on one of the informal rubbish tips overlooking Bogotá. The phenomenon of disposable bodies, whether real or allegorical, is not confined to Medellín.

Throughout the film, there is clever play on narrative levels, as we emerge at a number of points from the embedded story, often with the audio track forming a bridge to the internal narrator (the *culebrero*), so that for the cinematic spectator, the time of literal narration frames and relativizes the filmic narration, the literalizing of *story* making the film's *discourse* visible. At the end of *La estrategia*, and just before a concluding shot of the tenants' new plot of land once more overlooking the City, we emerge again from the diegesis to the level of character-narration to find that night has fallen over the storyteller and the news team. For the cinematic spectator, this sudden visual reminder of the time of narration has a telescoping effect in relation to the film's politics. At the end of this incredible feat of narration of a set of events which, in magic realist style, question the border between the fantastic and the real, "el punto final de esta gesta epopéyica popular," as the *culebrero* puts it, the reporter makes the naïve comment: "Está bien don Gustavo, lo que no entiendo es ¿todo esto para qué?." At first the narrator looks puzzled, then he becomes more and more angry as he replies: "¿Pa'qué? ¿Cómo que pa'qué? Pues pa' ¿Pa'qué le sirve a usted la dignidad? ¿Uh? Esa palabra no existe ¿o qué? [...] Pa' dignidad, hombre, pa' dignidad nuestra" (1:46). These words echo the words of don Jacinto, when asked by the tenants what his model of the crane and pulleys is for:

El Perro Romero: ¿Y qué ganamos con hacer lo que usted dice?

Don Jacinto: Nuestra dignidad.

Romero: Su estrategia no tiene antecedentes, Jacinto.

Jacinto: Eso es precisamente lo que más me gusta. Mira, Romero, no jodamos más, hagamos una cosa, usted haga lo suyo y yo lo mío. Si lo suyo no funciona, no importa. Pero por una vez tenga fé en las personas, y no sólo en las leyes. (0:13)

La estrategia might be termed a lesson in the value of dignity, and in the potential of popular spaces of representation to intervene in the deterritorialized landscapes of global finance. In the case of the more pessimistic

Rodrigo D., we might ask how, given the complicity of cinema with an objectifying visual regime, can a film, which *in one sense* comes perilously close to that horrendous conflation of life and spectacle which we find in the "genre" of the snuff movie, possibly make any positive bid, as Gaviria hopes, to reclaim an annihilated future? One possible answer lies in Gaviria's notion of cinematography as an *invisible* tracing the painstaking, collaborative outline of an invisible map with which we began, arguing for a poetic cinema of "las palabras menores," which would make perceptible those elements of everyday life which are erased from the Technicolour screens of commercial cinema. It is this attention to the microstories, those fleeting experiences of everyday life that are lost beneath the administrative parcellization and colonization of space, to an invisible soundtrack that would prize open the visual tyranny of the cinematic regime, which underlies Gaviria's precarious mappings and which, I believe, enables both of these films to make a bid for a future even as they bear witness to the eclipse of the body from the field of vision.

NOTES

- 1 *Rodrigo D. No futuro*, dir. Victor Manuel Gaviria, FOCINE, 1988, 35 mm, 90 min.; *La estrategia del caracol*, dir. Sergio Cabrera, FOCINE Crear Televisión Fotograma, 1993, 35 mm, 115 min.
- 2 *The Four-Gated City* (New York: Bantam, 1970 [1969]), p. 10.
- 3 Cit. in Fernando V. Arenas, "Victor Gaviria en flashback," *Kinetoscopio* [Medellín] 26 (julio-agosto 1994): 72-78 (p. 78).
- 4 Cit. in Santiago Andrés Gómez, "Los pulmones limpios: la obra de Victor Gaviria," *Kinetoscopio* [Medellín] 26 (julio-agosto 1994): 79-86 (p. 86).
- 5 *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974; rpt 1986), p. 118; trans. *The Production of Space* by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 98.
- 6 Testimony of Antonio, streetgang leader killed by vigilante death squads, cited in Alonso Salazar, *No nacimos pa'semilla*, trans. by Nick Caistor, *Born to Die in Medellín* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1992), p. 32.
- 7 References to, and quotations from, the films are given with approximate timings in the format hours:minutes.
- 8 He is nicknamed *culebrero* because he keeps a snake in the courtyard of the house, but also for his ability to spin yarns (the term "Paisa" refers to the region around Medellín in the central cordillera of Colombia). The brilliant framing device of having the whole story recounted by the *culebrero* was suggested to Cabrera by Jorge Goldenberg, scriptwriter of a number of the key Argentine films of the post-dictatorship period (information provided in discussion with Goldenberg).
- 9 Mariel Guiot, "Entrevista [con Sergio Cabrera]," "Ficha técnica" [Madrid] (junio 1994). (Leaflet distributed with Madrid screening of *La estrategia del caracol*. My thanks to Teresa de Carlos for providing me with a copy of this.)
- 10 Cabrera's parents were Spanish actors exiled from Nationalist Spain. Cabrera was born and lived in Colombia until the age of ten, when the family moved to China, where he attended secondary school (from 1960 to 1968). He returned to Colombia at the age of 18 to join the

- Ejército Popular de Liberación guerrilla movement for a period of four years. More recently (March 1998), he was elected as a Deputy in the Colombian Congress. His knowledge of left-wing politics is thus somewhat more than theoretical.
- 11 See, for example, his *The City and the Grassroots: A Crosscultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 314.
 - 12 See Gaviria, "Un ojo de nadie (reflexiones en torno a 'No futuro')," *Gaceta cine* [Medellín] 1 (marzo-abril, 1989): 34 (p. 4).
 - 13 Vittorio de Sica (1952). This film deals with the abandonment and destitution of old-age pensioners in postwar Italy. For an account of the parallel between the two films, see Héctor D. Fernández L'Hoeste, "Reviews: *Rodrigo D. No Futuro*," *Film Quarterly* 48.2 (Winter 1994-95): 48-51 (p. 48).
 - 14 Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan[©]_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 202.
 - 15 That is, illegal abduction and murder ("being taken for a walk") carried out by the police or paramilitary organizations.
 - 16 "God save the Queen | The fascist regime | They made you a moron | Potential Hbomb. | God save the Queen | She ain't no human being | There is no future | In England's dreaming. [...] | When there's no future | How can there be sin? | *We're the flowers in the dustbin | We're the poison in your human machine | We're the future, your future. [...] | No future, no future | No future for you. | No future, no future | No future for me,*" etc. (my emphasis; lyrics transcribed by Emir Ahmetspahic on <http://www.ho.tranas.se/~pistols/>). This single reached Nº 2 in the British charts, but the BBC refused to publish its title, so it was entered in the charts as a "blank."
 - 17 They are often abducted (by paramilitary or vigilante groups) in jeeps without number plates, their mutilated bodies turning up a few days later, as happens to the character Johncito (John Jairo Gómez) in the film.
 - 18 Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 179.
 - 19 The title of the song is "La muñeca," interpreted by Dulce (information given on the "Ficha Técnica", *Borradores de cine*, p. 15; see note 24 below).
 - 20 The film's music consists mostly of original recordings of punk and heavy-metal groups in Medellín, such as the "Banda pestes" and the "Banda mutantes," including the real-life group of the lead actor, Ramiro Meneses.
 - 21 p. 286. I am here and generally indebted to Derek Gregory's lucid exposition of Lefebvre's thought (see *Geographical Imaginations* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994], pp. 354-416).
 - 22 Víctor Gaviria, "Abismos en cámara: entrevista con Víctor Gaviria," *La Prensa* [Bogotá] Dominical (7 de abril de 1991): 20-21.
 - 23 Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, p. 392.
 - 24 Cited in Víctor Gaviria, "Reflexiones de no futuro," *Borradores de cine* [n.p. Colombia] (n.d. [1989?]): 16-18 (p. 18). These unreferenced photocopies can be consulted in the archives of the Fundación Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano, Santafé de Bogotá.
 - 25 *The Urbanization of Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 43; cit. Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, p. 93.