

Los Abrazos del Río¹

(The Embrace of the River)

A documentary film by Nicolás Rincón Gille

Documentary
73 min
HDcam or Beta Digit
16/9, Stereo, Color
OV Spanish, St English/French
2010

Cinematographer: Nicolás Rincón Gille
Editing: Cédric Zoenen
Sound : Vincent Nouaille
Mix : Paul Heymans
Production : Manon Coubia

Voa asbl and the Centre de l'Audiovisuel de Bruxelles (CBA), with the help of the Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel de la Communauté Française de Belgique and of the Télédiffuseurs Wallons, the loterie nationale, de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, and the Société Civile des Auteurs Multimédia (SCAM) "Bourse Brouillon d'un Rêve".

www.losabrazosdelrio.com
www.campohablado.com



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CENTRE DU CINÉMA
ET DE L'AUDIOVISUEL
COMMUNAUTÉ FRANÇAISE
DE BELGIQUE

¹ Second part of the project *Campo Hablado* (www.campohablado.com; www.losabrazosdelrio.com)

"He had jewelry on the fingers shining in the vastness of the water. Living in a wonderful palace made of pure gold. In the deep holes, in the dark eddies. The Mohan's domains don't have end. In its halls was heard a steady murmur, a monotonous hypnotic music.

His gaze was evil and its persecutions very dire"

Synopsis

The Mohan, Spirit of the Magdalena River in Colombia, lives deep in the waters, smoking tobacco and swigging *aguardiente*, the local alcohol. Sometimes he perches on a boulder in the middle of the river, waiting for humans to arrive. He teases the fishermen, entangling their nets and frightening away the fish. A greater charmer, the Mohan lures the most beautiful women down to his golden palace, deep under the water. From there, melodic music rises to the surface. Some women come back pregnant; others never come back at all.

People have begun to notice that the Mohan no longer appears at the surface of the river. Nowadays, people do not respect him as they used to; they are more afraid of the living.

The paramilitary has struck terror into the hearts of all, even the devil. Now all the Magdalena River conceals in its depths, are corpses.

Note of Intention

The legend of the *Mohán* is one of the best known in Colombia. It is associated with the great *Magdalena* River, which crosses the country from south to north, linking the Indian culture of the Andes with Afro-American culture on the Atlantic coast. It is considered to be a strong element in the imagination of the country.

Most Colombians who describe his features and habits, say the *Mohán* appears as a solitary shaman. In effect, the Spanish called the Indian *pijaos*, who fled the order established by the conquest, *Mohanes*. The *Mohán* however was wily and did not disappear. A great witch, with knowledge of age-old practices, he used his powers to resist time. By seducing other men's women, he managed to maintain his lineage.

Linking the progressive discovery of the *Mohán* with the path of the *Magdalena* River makes it possible to anchor the legend in the daily life of fishermen.

But the *Magdalena* is also a river that has seen the worst sort of political violence. The bodies that are constantly thrown into its depths, sometimes cut to pieces, are sweeping away the magic.

Will the *Mohán* disappear one day? Will he take with him the memory of the Indian peoples? Will the magic of the *Magdalena* be smothered by so many acts of barbarism perpetrated with such apparent impunity? Can violence cancel out everything, even the story that makes memory?

Violence is often seen as an agent of total devastation. Nothing survives it. My perception is that the oral tradition is very strong. It can survive, if only to bear witness to the pain and share it. Stories create a bond that opposes silence, the pillar of tragedy. The speaker seeks to put us in his place, to break his solitude and lessen his pain.

I think about Carmen, the character in *En lo escondido*. Being in that film was a great therapy for her. She evacuated all that she had endured during her life (though this was not my main aim). When the story is not a lament, or a linear description of the facts, but a complex, dense, narrative construction, the peasants find it easy to put us in their shoes. The facts, unbearably violent, touch us differently. We can no longer fake indignation.

Oral tradition is bushy. It is not linear; it does not sit quietly on a time line. It creates its own time, growing like a tree with many branches. Everything echoes everything else; everything is balanced but not necessarily symmetrical at first sight. This seems to be an ideal way of telling the perception of a country that is as violent as it is magic.

The river is a story in itself: its birth, its troubled path and its arrival at the sea are markers that build a time independent of man. As if nature was capable of

telling its own story, the current has its own language and talks to us. First it tells us it is impossible to swim twice in the same river. Not only are we minuscule in terms of the temporality of the world, but we can do nothing to stop it. It also speaks of the depths that hide a world in which we could be lost. Tree trunk, stone or body, we are just one more object. Diminished, we are obliged to accept the limits of our will. But there is still one way to master this river, to appropriate its meaning: we make stories.

So what could be more normal than personifying the river, making it into a home, giving it a real voice, peopling it with beings who, benevolent or dangerous, address us directly. This tale is universal and sometimes loses itself in history. Danger and magic come together to give rise to a double characterisation. In its capricious will, the river is feminine, but in its determined strength, it is also masculine. This elementary duality forms a tale that can have several variations. Finally, every people tells tales of their river. And in this tale, we will hear the voice of the Colombian people.

The Context

Colombia in 2009

Colombian legends are the reflection of a complex and difficult reality. They are scary because they are a means of quickly and effectively integrating endemic violence. The characters make people disappear in the same way that the “guerrilla” and “paramilitaries” do. They work in the same way: the bodies disappear forever or they are thrown into the rivers.

But while the bloodiness and the cruelty of the stories reflect a complicated political situation, they also serve to get things out that cannot be expressed any other way. The fact of telling stories other than ones involving commonplace events allows the peasants to ‘balance their books’ in the face of a situation that is beyond them. We can understand how a brave woman like Carmen (*Campo Hablado I: En lo Escondido*) can speak so well of witches in a society dominated by that which is most cruel in the male instinct for domination, be it her husband, the devil or the paramilitaries. Deep down, each legend contains the hope that order and balance will regain the high ground. It all depends on the strength of these fabulous beings and the respect of the people who confront them. But these days, the old stories are no longer so frightening; legends are losing their role and becoming stories without power (*Campo Hablado II : Los Abrazos del Rio*).

How can I present Colombia?

This country, situated at the entry to South America enjoys a geographical diversity to which is owed, perhaps, the coexistence of various regional cultures (each with a different balance in terms of Indians, Africans and Spanish). Black Africa is well and truly present on the coasts. It is on the Pacific coast that one finds the most communities of African origin, because of the density of a rain forest that was able to protect its villages composed exclusively of those who fled slavery. The Indian tribes, scattered all over, are more dominant in the Andes region and that of the Amazonian virgin forest. But most Colombians are of mixed race and live in a real mixture of three cultures.

Nevertheless, there is a deep scorn for everything Indian and African. This is an attitude inherited from the Spanish elites and completely integrated by a bourgeoisie that is eager to take on the cultural models of elsewhere. Yet this scorn is less dangerous than an attitude rooted in the use of power to preserve, at any cost, an economic and social situation that benefits only a thin strata of big landowners, both in the countryside and in town.

Colombian violence is, in my opinion, the direct consequence of such an attitude. It is possible to identify the numerous actors involved and understand how they are connected.

On the one hand, there is “la Guérilla”, which was born in the fifties, founded by a group of peasants that gradually became politicised. This “Guérilla” has profoundly changed to become an association with its own economy and which

currently manages regions where climate conditions make it possible to both cultivate drugs and take advantage of a very dense nature, which provides protection for them. The political discourse of this group is still present but is very dissociated from their control and confrontation practices.

On the other hand there are the “paramilitaries”, who grew out of the association of drug barons, certain politicians, owners of great stretches of the countryside and a few high-ranking military men. A group of peasants placed themselves under the orders of these “natural” chiefs to oppose the Guérilla and its friends. These two groups started to confront each other in a perverse manner. Unable to face each other head on, they led a policy of selective extermination that mainly targeted civilians suspected of belonging to one or the other group. The situation of the peasants, obliged to house and feed the troops that happened by (whichever group they were from), quickly became very complicated. They were obliged to choose their camp or risk disappearing. Soon, the paramilitaries found it better to completely take over small peasant properties and use them for profitable uses. In a short space of time, most of the peasants were displaced towards the big cities, where they pile up with very few prospects (Campo Hablado III: Noche Herida).

What about their culture, their imagination? All you have to do is know the nicknames that the peasants, in a few regions, have given to both the Guérilla and the Paramilitaries. Some are *Los Amigos* (friends) and the others are *Los Muchachos* (the young boys). *Los Amigos* ironically refers to the former political will to be “with the people”; *Los Muchachos* indicates carefree young men without family or wife...

The political situation is very delicate. President Alvaro Uribe has led a war-like and aggressive policy that sought to militarily exterminate “the Guérilla”. He counted on the support of the United States army, more present than ever. On the other hand, he made no secret of his policy to have done with the paramilitary groups: they entered civil life protected by an amnesty that made no distinction between the atrocious crimes and the drug trafficking. These groups gave up arms without truly disbanding. Their power logic is clearly still present, supporting a now official economy that directly benefits their leaders. In one fell swoop, the territories that belonged to the displaced peasants became legally theirs.

This way of going about things is supported by 70% of Colombians according to the official polls. Even though it doesn’t stand up to critical examination, it defines itself as a “strong arm” policy, so much appreciated these days. It claims to be the forerunner of a future peace.

But it doesn’t seem to be built to last for long...

Reference Works

My first reference work is a key film in the landscape of Colombian cinema: “El Rio de las Tumbas” (1964) by Julio Luzardo, one of the first films in Colombia to move away from the norms of entertainment cinema. It is the story of a village near the Magdalena River that lives through the violence of the forties. As the corpses endlessly float by, the villagers are locked into the mechanisms of a fratricidal political hatred. This film intelligently faces the representation of violence, always interpreted in a polar manner.

The film made one option that paid off: humour. The distance this provided allowed it to move away from sensationalism while the strong features of Luzardo’s characters underlined the stupidity of violence. An echo of García Marquez hangs over the whole narrative.

Nevertheless, the work has aged, especially when compared to all the works that followed it.

Currently, I find that Colombian fine art takes reflection further. I have in mind two particular works. I think that they are close to the documentary approach. *Bocas de Ceniza* (Mouth of Ashes) is the name given to the mouth of the Magdalena. It is also the title of a video work by Juan Manuel Echavarría that shakes me each time I see it. The set-up is very simple, even minimalist. A series of people are singing into the camera. In close ups, with no reference space, we follow the content of their songs very closely.

It is easy to guess who they are: each person is the survivor of a massacre. The song allows them to return to this painful moment without being overwhelmed. The rhythm and the melody are interrupted by the effort involved in such an exercise. The horror of the situation is shared by the spectator. The pain of the victim is shared. It is a work with simple staging which nevertheless implies a great deal of previous work between the artist and the characters involved. Above all, it requires trust. I am deeply moved by the result. The songs seem to lighten the stories. But this distance makes them all the more poignant because of the victims’ involvement.

The other is a work by Oscar Muñoz. It consists of small, completely identical mirrors in a circle. The public discovers their own reflection. But from a closer distance another entirely different image emerges. The spectators’ breath on the mirror reveals faces of victims of the violence. Our features are superimposed over those of an *n.n.* (an unidentified deceased). This time, it is the participation of the spectator that brings the victims out of oblivion, for the space of a breath. For the spectator blowing on the mirror feels like a game. In fact, he is revealing a violent world.

I like these two works because they remind me of the possibilities and limitations of the documentary. The involvement of the victims in the narration of the violence seems unavoidable to me. Yet it is necessary to create distance

between the viewer and the subject to ensure that they and the characters are not overwhelmed by a world that is too dramatic to be experienced and assimilated. Trying to make the violence real enough to be experienced in a realistic treatment would increase the original act and aggress the spectator, who would soon become saturated.