

Wounded Night by Nicolás Rincón Gille

86 min; colour, HD; 16/9



Displaced from the countryside due to violence, Blanca has recently moved to a rudimentary shelter on the Bogota border with her three grandsons. In the thick of his adolescent crisis, Didier, the elder of the three boys, is already drifting off towards an uncertain future. With the help of the 'blessed souls', Blanca fights to protect him from a distance, and watches over the two younger boys, John and Camilo, fearing that they too will stray.

This is the story of a grandmother fighting for the future of her family: an age-old tale in a contemporary context.

“Noche Herida / Wounded Night” is the final part of the trilogy “Campo Hablado” (The Narrated Countryside), a documentary project that seeks to draw close to the oral tradition of the peasants of the Colombian countryside and the way they deal with the violence of which they have been the main victims. It is a cinema project. This film is not about making an inventory of traditions. It is not about listening to legends or contemplating the landscape, but rather placing oneself there where words add a new layer of meaning to the landscape, where the real and the imaginary mingle.

This film was preceded by “En lo Escondido / Those Who Wait in the Darkness” (2007), Joris Ivens Award at the Cinema of the Real Festival 2007, and “Los Abrazos del Río / The Embrace of the River” (2010), Golden Balloon Award at the 3 Continents Festival.

Directing and camera work: Nicolás Rincón Gille; Producer: Manon Coubia; Sound and image editing: Cédric Zoenen; Sound: Vincent Nouaille; Produced by: voa film, CBA, FWB, RTBF, SCAM (Brouillon d’un rêve grant) and Medio de Contención (COL).

The Approach

One of the great fractures in peasant families in Bogotá is between the generations. Old people have become useless. Only the young can adapt and their families depend on them. In Bogotá they're called "the acrobats" because they are willing to jump out at the first red light and invent a circus routine in the time it takes for the lights to change. Whereas their parents would have begged, they put on a show to bring in some money. Encouraged by this new life, they very quickly acquire a feeling of superiority in relation to their families. At the same time, they know they are completely shunned by the world around them, the millions of passengers who stare at them. Freewheelers, they end up accepting any old shortcut and become cannon fodder for the mafias.

The big cities, swinging between fear and rejection, have pigeonholed them. Their way of speaking has become a distinguishing mark. To camouflage their accent, which identifies them as being from the countryside, they use their own slang. Instantly recognizable - and mistrusted - it is the same all over Colombia. The city forces them into a single mould, and the cleverest among them use it to yield a profit. They terrorize the others.

And people forget that these new delinquents were, above all, victims.

The way the city pushes people to think only of themselves annihilates all the bonds that existed in the countryside.

But it is precisely at this point that popular culture resists and tries to give meaning to a life where every day is completely different from the last.

New tales are born that deal with all these new problems.

* * *

“A long time ago,
when the hills to the south of Bogotá
were not the teeming *Bolívar* slum of today,

a rebellious child tried to hit his mother
because she wouldn't give him a coin.
As he ran away,
his angry mother put a curse on him.

They say the child fell and rolled a long time
before coming to a stop on the banks of a stream.
He turned to stone...

The stone is the shape of a man lying down,
with his arms crossed on his belly.
Some say he has grown over time...

Before,
the stone was smaller
and people came to ask for work,
to find a lost child,
they sometimes even placed
their sick children or animals on it...

The neighbours say that one day
some adolescents had a bet;
they wanted to show that this stone
could be shattered into pieces.
But when they tried,
they were the ones who shattered.”¹

There is a big stone in the middle of the slope, with space all around it. It is impossible to build on it. It is called “*la piedra del muerto*” (the stone of the dead man). The shape is not easy to make out, someone has to point out to you the little body lying on its back. This, it is said, was a disobedient child, turned to stone for having run away from home.

¹ Germán Álvarez “La Leyenda de La Piedra del Muerto” in *El Tiempo*, 22nd March, 2005

But the legend seems a little forced. It is still young. Passing generations have not yet enriched it and given it its place in a complex tradition such as that of the Mohan or witches.

But people believe in its powers because it points to something fundamental; the disintegration of the family unit.

This tide of disobedient children should understand the lesson. Yet, they do the opposite and take pleasure trying to destroy the stone to prove to others that it has no power. It would appear to be a simple task, and yet, they can't quite manage it. And as time goes by, it is they who disappear.

Ironically, their parents turn once again to the stone to ask for their reappearance. If only their children had believed them...

There's something not quite right with this story. We glimpse both the importance of the story and its inability to make real headway. What is it that gnaws away at the power of this legend? What is it that pushes so many youngsters to refuse its meaning? Perhaps we should take a look around.

In effect, in this brightly lit night, the constant movements of people from outside the neighbourhood remain obscure.

Alexander Quirama Morales liked to spend the afternoon
sitting on the swings of the little sloping park
in the neighbourhood of *Las Colinas* in *Rafael Uribe*,
in the south of Bogotá.

Quirama, 31 years old, was mentally handicapped
and lived like a child
by his mother's side on the second floor of a little house
in a gully next to the park...

*"Since he was mentally ill, he didn't have a normal job
but he gave a helping hand to people in the neighbourhood,
carrying gas bottles up the stairs,
and clearing wasteland"*,
explains his brother, Hector Quirama.

Last November 16th, Alexander did not come home.
A few people in the neighbourhood saw him
get into a van
in the company of two other youths.

On December 1st, the family was finally contacted. Alexander was listed as having died during a clash with the army, on September 17th.²

Since 2002, youngsters in the suburbs had been contacted several times by people who do not belong to the neighbourhood but who had a highly providential aura about them: they came bringing offers of work and sometimes paid an advance.

Despite the mistrust and prohibition of their families, some youngsters finally accepted and left, without thinking. Many got into the vans that took them far from home to places they did not know.

Nothing more was heard of them.

At the same time, the army announced battles wherein the guerrilla fighters were increasingly decimated. Victory was near, the television endlessly broadcast images of the corpses of those fallen in combat. People looked on amazed. For the first time in its history, it seemed that the guerrilla fighters were almost defeated.

The strategy of Uribe, the president who refused to negotiate with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), was presented as a great success. Never before had the army been so professional and efficient. Every enemy, dead or alive, brought in a fixed bonus for the troops and those who denounced them.

The extent of their losses made it look as if all the guerrilla fighters preferred to die rather than surrender.

But one day someone recognised one of the youngsters from the neighbourhood among the so-called guerrilla fighter corpses. Soon, the whole macabre strategy was revealed. It was called "*falsos positivos*" (because the army presented the bodies as positive proof of fighting) and it turned out to be embarrassing for all concerned, even the warlike government, which was reluctantly forced to silently dismiss a significant number of high-ranking military officers. In fact, the youngsters that had left the neighbourhoods were immediately killed and their bodies used as proof of combat against guerrilla fighters who had the power to be everywhere. It was a virtual confrontation that took place in the heads of the Colombians.

² Excerpt from the article: "Desaparecidos en Bogotá, muertos en combate en Boyacá", Lorenzo Morales, editor of Semana

The government acknowledged that 2000 civilian dead were counted as combatants. But the families are even more numerous. They demand justice.

The macabre calculation of this strategy, instigated by paramilitary groups in association with the army, was to reinforce the war. It also allowed them to pocket significant sums in rewards.

The peasants were obliged to face the same deathly logic that had led them to flee from their homes: their lives had no value anywhere.

At the time when the crimes were discovered, the defence minister, Juan Manuel Santos (new president of Colombia since 2010) reacted in an unexpected manner: he gave his troops the order to stop fighting. And his troops obeyed.

This simple solution was represented as a new sign of goodwill on the part of the government. Yet all it did was gear up the machine of war again. Those who criticised the army's actions were presented as friends of the FARC. Associations of the mothers of the "*falsos positivos*", the best known of which is called "*las madres de Soacha*", their lawyers and other groups were threatened.

The affair had to be hushed up, by counting on the silence and submission of the peasants. And in effect, such matters were less and less talked about.

Despite numerous protest initiatives, symbolic acts of resistance and the denouncing of new selective assassinations, everything seemed to relegate this story to the past. Signs of protest increased. Families buried themselves up to their necks to start a doubly painful hunger strike, the central square of Bogotá was covered with bricks, each representing a child that had been killed, other families started living in plastic tents in the public parks of the capital. But to no avail, no matter how poignant. However, these acts of resistance nag at the conscience of the city-dwellers.

When the violence was happening in the countryside, it was a long way away from the cities. When the peasants arrived in mass, chased from their homes, they were all piled into the impossible hills in the suburbs. But now that they are making their misery visible, they can no longer be marginalised. Henceforth, they must be reckoned with...

And so it is that the child turned to stone begins to resonate, to take on a broader, more complex meaning. Bearing witness to both a

broken prohibition and the disappearance of a whole generation, it tells a story on several levels.

Oral tradition also transforms the city.

*“Put your children to bed early
or we will put them to sleep forever.”*
Paramilitary graffiti in the south of Bogota



Photo from “El Tiempo” of a peasant protest in Bogotá

“And now, as they listened for the thunder,
they heard them: soft cries and lamentations
wind-borne, wandering down to them.
The mourners were chanting over the graves of their loved
ones, playing guitars softly or praying.
A sound like windbells, a ghostly tintinnabulation,
reached their ears.
A titanic roar of thunder overwhelmed it,
rolling down the valleys.
The avalanche had started.

Malcom Lowry

The Reasons for the Exodus

Bogotá is the capital of a country wherein 2 to 4 million people have been displaced due to violence. We are pretty familiar with the violence meted out by guerrilla fighters who control regions made impregnable by nature and geography; we are familiar with the cultivation of drugs as a means of finance; the political use of kidnapping; the pressure on the civilian population; the guerrilla fighters' practice of incorporating new recruits. That's not bad, but it is far from everything. Yet that is all we know.

A conservative, war-like elite has risen to power and endeavours to present guerrilla warfare to the whole world as the only cause of violence, a strategy whereby large landowners can become motivated businessmen without changing Spanish colonial practices a single jot. This direct descent from Spanish families that held the reins of a country where Indians, Africans and half-breeds lived in unspeakable chaos, is a mark of pride.

Today, everything seems to be in place to increase their power by subjugating the population.

Firstly, there is the official support of the government and the army. The political class boasts of having been raised in "*la finca de papa*" (father's property). The army is trained and indoctrinated to control the civilian population, not to serve it.

Then there is the formation of private armies by major international mercenaries, paid by the drug barons (who are also proud to be rich landowners). These militias, initially formed to protect private property from guerrilla warfare, very soon destroyed any possible centre of social discontent in a surge of simplistic anticommunism.

Their action was brutal and exhausting for associations (peasants, trade unions, popular organizations, cultural centres, etc.). And since hatred is an infectious disease, they had to go into the city to assassinate teachers, intellectuals, jurists... The list is long.

One of the founders of these private militias, known as "*Convivir*" (to coexist), the governor of Antioquia (one of the richest departments of Colombia), rose to power in 2002. Alvaro Uribe was elected by a historical majority that saw him as "a pacifier". Hand on heart, he promised to wipe out the guerrillas by force. It wasn't long before all

the paramilitary groups of the country were amnestied under conditions unknown to the public.

Properties were enlarged as the small peasants left. Over a short period of time, great stretches of African palms were planted. The government swore that this was the market of the future. The international concerns for the environment and the need to find alternative sources of fuel were a golden opportunity. The countryside once again became a place of interest for big companies. There was no room for the little people.

The imperative was to think big and move fast. At all costs.

In brief, these are the reasons for the peasant exodus.

But what I'm giving you here is the global viewpoint, which is inevitably improper, since I'm doing it in their stead. Only the peasants themselves can give us insight; not to construct a sociological treatise, or to defend a specific (and perhaps necessary) political point of view, but rather to give us a taste of their distress as much as their ability to go beyond it.

As a filmmaker, this is what interests me.

So my intention is not to present a global explanation of the situation as if I was a skilled educator, nor to film the masses of peasants as if they were numbers and then throw them in the face of the viewers, accusing them of being ignorant or, worse, indifferent. I refuse to take the beaten track of militancy, which so often ends up merging with the precepts of the TV news that it claims to combat.

In my work, I try to get close to the experiences and feelings of the peasants. I take the time, or rather, respect the time of the characters I meet, but above all, I take a close interest in their perception of the conflict as a simple account of the facts. It is not linear, but appears rather as an arborescence that is both blunt and poetic, where *imagination gives new meaning to the harshness of reality*. This imagination is, I feel, the source of a possible film.

The Place

Along the streams of water cutting into the tracks, thousands of former peasants go down to the big city to lose themselves in the frenzy of everyday life, in a space impossible to understand at first glance...

Here, no one cares about the full moon. No one boasts of being able to castrate a calf.

Here, night is erased. The moon pales and takes on the piss yellow glow of the street lamps. Glow-worms become invisible; frogs fall silent. No trees to stop the wind, no branches to hold a nest. Only the dogs continue to bark as they used to, but they sound temperamental, bored and above all, too close to each other; they have no distant reaches to watch. The line of the horizon where the opaque chain of mountains melted into the sky has been replaced by an endless mass of little blocks of tiles and concrete. Only the long muddy streets criss-cross through this heap, offering tiny spaces where people trample around, uncomplaining.

Here, dawn comes brutally. Waking, if indeed sleep comes at all, is no longer done to the rhythmic singing of animals. The last roosters no longer cry out strongly, rather they melt into a monologue. The light of day arrives without gradation. The constant humidity in the air drowns everything in a sharp white.

Here, where night no longer exists, there is no more room for wonder and even less for the healthy fear instilled by the stories that were still told so recently. The darkness has become a memory. All these stories, told for generations, seem old and incoherent. In this city, it is impossible to feel the evil that hides in the shadows, taking on semi-human shapes. Here, nature no longer commands respect. This old notion of evil has disappeared to the point of seeming almost naïve. For the children who grow up here, all the popular legends of the countryside are stories without consequence.

It could have been like anywhere else in the world, just another economic change, statistically measuring the exodus of peasants to fulfil the needs of the big cities.

But at an altitude of 2600m, on the high plateaux of the central cordillera that marks the end of the Andes, seven million inhabitants

have a different view of the massive arrival of peasants (40 000 per year).

It's difficult to see them as a blunder in the evolution of universal capitalism. Above all, when you hear what they have to say. Every day, the arrival of 22 families, desperately searching for a roof over their heads, leads one to suspect a deeper story, one with proper nouns and specific places.

But who takes the time, these days, to listen to that story?