



Dreams and decoloniality: Indigenous representation in contemporary Colombian cinema

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Introduction

This research project explores the representation of Indigenous communities in the films *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Guerra, 2015) and *Pájaros de verano* (Guerra, 2018). The analysis of these films considers the role of Indigenous representation in the project of decoloniality defined by Maldonado-Torres as ‘the continued confrontation with the damaging consequences of coloniality’ (2006: 4). With a rise in the global recognition and outreach of ‘new Colombian cinema’ (Zuluaga, 2019: 3), alongside the recent presidential election of leftist Gustavo Petro, this project aims to evaluate the significance of the audio-visual medium of cinema in granting or undermining Indigenous political agency. By grounding the discussion in a nuanced understanding of the project of decoloniality and decolonial aesthetics, this project seeks to unveil new insights regarding the implications of Indigenous cinematic representation. While recognising its privileged positionality, there is hope that shedding new light on debates surrounding decoloniality and Indigenous representation will invite readers to explore issues such as white saviourism, exoticisation, and cultural appropriation. Beyond this, audiences are asked to reconsider the socio-political implications of the digital transformation of media and the consequences for a so-called ‘Third Cinema’ (Rony, 1996).

According to the recent census completed in 2018, Indigenous communities in Colombia account for 4.4% of the nation’s population and inhabit mainly rural locations. The largest Indigenous community is the Wayúu, who inhabit the northern peninsula of La Guajira along the border with Venezuela. Despite adopting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, which recognises the cultural, linguistic, and political agency of the communities in Colombia, there has been little economic or political support. In fact, after falling victim to illegal land seizures and the murder of political activists, Indigenous communities across Colombia have suffered disproportionately from the years of conflict that have plagued the nation. Although the 2016 peace agreement signed between governmental forces and the FARC guerrilla group signalled some form of hope, there has since been a ‘systematic eradication of Indigenous people’ (Villa, 2020: 3). In fact, twenty-five politically active Indigenous leaders were murdered in 2019 by either military guerrillas or drug cartels. However, at a time when the region of Latin America and Colombia itself are experiencing a wave of new leftist governments, an exploration of Indigenous socio-political agency seems particularly relevant.

To explore how contemporary Colombian cinema has represented Indigenous communities and the (de)colonial consequences of this process, this paper starts by establishing a backdrop to the key terminology associated with decoloniality and its relationship with contemporary Colombian filmmaking. Subsequently, the project more closely analyses how Indigenous subjectivities are enunciated in the films *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* through the motif of dreams and the subconscious. This analysis recognises the role of dreams from both a narrative and aesthetic perspective by considering the influence of artistic and literary styles such as surrealism, ‘lo real maravilloso’ and magical realism. The discussion concludes by contextualising the contemporary national reality of Colombia and evaluating the socio-political implications of Indigenous representation in digital and transnational filmmaking.

Colombian cinema, Indigenous representation and (de)coloniality

Colombia's film industry has been active since the emergence of the audio-visual medium of cinema at the end of the nineteenth century. However, due to the country's infamously violent political instability during the twentieth century, it has taken until the first years of the twenty-first century for national cinema to become more globally recognisable. Following the footsteps of the New Latin American Cinema wave that began in the 1990s, Carolina Rocha discusses how the implementation of two significant laws – 814 in 2003 and 1556 in 2012 – has supported the emergence of a new Colombian national cinema (2018). These laws have been instrumental in creating a financial platform for directors like Ciro Guerra and Oscar Ruiz Navia to fund their filmmaking and subsequently garner global recognition. Guerra's *El abrazo de la serpiente* (2015), being the first Colombian film nominated for an Oscar, is a testament to this growth in recognition.

Similar to other contemporary Latin American nations, filmmaking in Colombia has become infused with a transnational texture. As discussed by Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim in the first edition of *Transnational Cinema*, a growing number of films are produced under the context of globalisation (2010). International collaboration has represented a pathway to global recognition for non-Western filmmakers such as Mexico's Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Gonzalez Alejandro Iñárritu. Despite this success, transnational filmmaking has posed problems for the traditional way of defining cinema under national categories. Attempts at determining what is meant by national cinema are vast, as noted by Higbee. In many Latin American countries like Colombia, where diaspora is common, national delineations are even further complicated. Additionally, when discussing the representation of Indigenous communities who often identify themselves as separate ethnic nations, the idea of Colombia's national cinema is also destabilised. However, for this project, Colombian cinema is understood as that which engages with national subjectivities and whose production teams include national subjects.

The increase in funding following greater global recognition has allowed Colombian filmmakers to look toward the country's rural and 'undiscovered' periphery. Instead of the characteristically violent and gritty urban backdrop that featured in many films at the end of the last century, new funding granted to filmmakers pushed them to investigate the natural frontiers of the Caribbean and Pacific coastline and the Amazonian region in the south. This turn to an investigation of the rural areas in Colombia and a focus on the untold consequences of a conflict that has lasted over half a century is what María Ospina coins the 'rural turn' (2018: 1). Key films that form part of the rural turn in Colombia include: *El vuelco del cangrejo* (Ruiz-Navia, 2009), *Los colores de la montaña* (Arbeláez, 2010), *Chocó* (Hinestroza, 2012) and *La tierra y la sombra* (Acevedo, 2015). A consequence of the growing number of films that have pictured rural landscapes is an increase in the representation of their Indigenous inhabitants. Alongside the more recent *El abrazo* and *Pájaros*, Guerra's second feature, *Los viajes del viento* (2009), is a journey across rural Colombia where spectators encounter various Indigenous communities such as the Wayúu.

Investigating these rural Indigenous communities has led filmmaking in Colombia to question the imposition of centre and periphery relationships. Indeed, Guerra's recent features, *El abrazo de la serpiente* (2015) and *Los pájaros de verano* (2018), challenge notions of centre and periphery in both a geographical and socio-political sense. In other words, the films present the experience of Indigenous communities with reduced socio-political agency and living in the country's remote Amazonian and Guajira regions. By challenging how these communities are marginalised geographically and politically, the films interrogate colonial notions of 'othering' that have historically subjugated Indigenous Peoples. In this way, there is an overlap in an examination of

geographic and political borders which highlights how Indigenous Peoples were marginalised and ‘othered’ on multiple levels.

To understand the relationship between the films and the project of decoloniality, it is necessary to establish a terminology framework to fully appreciate what is meant by the term as it relates to cinema. First, let us consider Frantz Fanon and his discourse expressed in *Wretched of the Earth* (1962) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). As a contemporary of significant anti-colonial scholars and artists, such as Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, García Canclini, and Ousmane Sembène, Fanon fiercely critique the continuing sociological and psychological consequences of colonialism in a postcolonial world during the 1960s. Not only did he play a significant role in contemporary twentieth-century anti-colonial movements, such as the Independence of Algeria in 1962, but he also laid the foundation for many preeminent scholars who have attempted to determine what is meant by decoloniality. Lewis Gordon, perhaps the most significant contemporary interlocutor on the work of Fanon, has reinforced how Fanon’s key ideas have facilitated developments in both the field of postcolonial studies as well as feminist critical theory and ethnic studies. For example, scholars such as Judith Butler and bell hooks can be seen to reference and build upon Fanon’s critique of social hierarchies imposed by colonialism in their respective works *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance* (1992).

Determining what is meant by decoloniality requires an understanding of the definition of colonialism and coloniality. While they are inexorably linked, these terms hold different meanings. Firstly, Jane Hiddleston defines colonialism as the act of invasion and overtaking of one nation’s sovereignty by another and the imposition of Eurocentric structures of power, being, and knowledge (2012: 23). The ‘discovery’ and subsequent colonisation of the continents of North and South America and the Caribbean by European nations since 1492 is the most significant way Hiddleston exemplifies her definition of colonialism. In contrast, Aníbal Quijano understands coloniality as the structures of power, being, and knowledge that were, and continue to be, used to organise society according to Western ideals of civilisation (2007: 5). In this sense, coloniality has persisted beyond the end of formal colonialism into a postcolonial world in which these structures continue to influence society. Despite Quijano’s use of the postcolonial fate of Latin America to exemplify what is meant by coloniality, the term can be closely linked to ideas found in Fanon’s work surrounding neo-colonialism and the reimposition of racial and socioeconomic hierarchies in formally colonised African, Asian, and North American nations.

In the last twenty years, scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres have drawn upon this understanding of coloniality to define and discuss the concept of decoloniality and the later idea of the decolonial turn. According to Maldonado Torres, decoloniality should be understood as an ongoing project dealing with the damaging consequences of coloniality, otherwise referred to as the “colonial wound”. Mignolo defines the colonial wound as the characterisation of previously colonised nations as socially, economically, and politically underdeveloped (2000: 14). In this sense, decoloniality is a project that seeks to highlight socioeconomic, political, economic, and racial injustices symptomatic of coloniality. It also identifies the institutional structures propagating colonial epistemologies and power relations. The decolonial project critically engages with, subverts, and deconstructs these causes and effects to find new forms of being, knowledge, and social relationships. It is under the guise of this definition of decoloniality that Maldonado-Torres coined the idea of the decolonial turn, which encompasses the rise of decolonial discourse expressed by Fanon over the last sixty years. As with philosophical progressions such as the rise of poststructuralism and existentialism, the decolonial turn represents a radical change in interpreting the world that focuses on the deconstruction and subversion of Western and Eurocentric ways of being and knowing.

A significant part of the decolonial discourse is the concept of decolonial aesthetics, defined by Miguel Rojas-Sotelo as ‘ongoing artistic projects responding to the darker side of imperial

globalisation and coloniality' (2011: 88). As part of a group of key decolonial scholars, Rojas-Sotelo calls for a reflection of decoloniality in the cultural and artistic sphere. Indeed, a significant exhibition held in 2011 by decolonial scholars included a wide range of creative installations that engaged with the concept of decolonial aesthetics. In addition to pieces of art, theatrical productions, and literature, decolonial aesthetics is a project that champions 'radically collaborative practices' (Rojas-Sotelo, 2011: 89). The filmmaking process can be closely aligned with decolonial aesthetics due to the numerous creative roles it includes.

Nevertheless, since the emergence of cinema at the end of the nineteenth century, it has had an intimate relationship with coloniality. Juan Poblete notes how influential films have been in reproducing colonial narratives surrounding social, racial, linguistic, religious, and political hierarchies (2020: 246). Poblete highlights how the onscreen propagation of exotic and culturally appropriated enunciations of Indigenous Peoples has been significant in supporting coloniality. The cinematic representation of Indigenous, non-Western, and 'othered' communities in major Western films contributed to the propagation of 'primitivism'. Defined by Edward Hirsch as 'the aesthetic idealisation that either emulates or aspires to recreate "primitive" experience' (2014: 485), primitivism was drawn upon in the ethnographic and ethno-fiction genres of filmmaking in the twentieth Century. Significant examples of the genres include Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955), which focuses on a problematic representation of the West African Hauka ritual, and Díaz Ordaz's *Peregrinación a Chalma* (1922), which demonstrates, in a similarly disturbing fashion, the rites and dances of religious parties in Chalma, Mexico. These are amongst a long list of films that have engaged with, and supported, colonial aesthetics through the exoticisation and cultural appropriation of Indigenous subjects. Cultural appropriation can be exemplified in various ways and it is defined as 'the inappropriate adoption of elements of a culture or identity by members of another culture or identity' (Okafor, 2013).

However, as part of the decolonial turn, contemporary Indigenous representation on screen has become part of decolonial aesthetics. Within the context of Latin American and Colombian cinema, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers have sought to use the medium to represent Indigenous communities to deconstruct coloniality – too many times. Examples of non-Indigenous filmmakers that have represented Indigenous communities in Colombia in the last thirty years include *The Heart of the World* (Ereira, 1996) and *Aluna* (Ereira, 2012), *La Buena Vida* (Schanze, 2012), and *Thinking like a mountain* (Hick, 2018). These documentary films had British and German directors. They represented the Kogui, Wayúu, and Arhuaco communities, showcasing their struggles with the threat of natural resource extraction and the climate crisis in Northern Colombia. Each film calls into question the role of neoliberalism in threatening Indigenous cultural and linguistic survival. Although positioned as a form of empowerment by giving a voice to Indigenous communities, the assumption that these communities have no means to communicate their situation reproduces colonial narratives of white saviourism. Several critics, such as Pablo Mora, have highlighted how *Aluna*, in particular, heavily exoticises the Kogui communities' culture and contemporary lifestyle, labelling its director, Alan Ereira, as 'a white saviour' (2012: 34). In contrast to Ereira's two films, the creative process in Schanze and Hick's *La Buena Vida* and *Thinking Like a Mountain* were much more accepting of artistic influence by community members. However, under the context of decolonial aesthetics, the representation of Indigenous communities in films produced by non-Indigenous filmmakers differs significantly from Indigenous filmmaking.

The Zhigoneshi Collective has been producing films since 2007 and is not an isolated case in the region of Latin America, where Indigenous filmmaking is not a recent phenomenon. Critiquing coloniality in the national context of Bolivia, the revolutionary Grupo Ukamau, spear-headed by director Jorge Sanjinés, was one of the earliest and most notable examples of decolonial aesthetics in film. This collective sought to deconstruct colonial structures of power and knowledge that remained in Bolivia and across Latin America for Indigenous communities such as the Aymara (Stam, 2003). In

a similar way, but within a more contemporary Colombian context, the Zhigoneshi Collective has engaged in filmmaking to aid the project of decoloniality over the last fifteen years. As noted by Lulkowska, films such as *Resistencia a la línea negra* (2011) and *Sey Amrimaku – la otra oscuridad* (2012) were created in a collaborative environment and released for free for global consumption via the digital platform YouTube. By rejecting the Eurocentric concept of auteur cinema, where films are interpreted as the product of one creative mind, the Zhigoneshi Collective embraces the fact that this medium is produced in an inherently collaborative environment that incorporates – among other roles – cinematographers, directors, sound engineers, actors, and producers. In addition, by recognising the power of digitalised and accessible media platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, the Collective has taken advantage of Eurocentric technology in a way that destabilises Western narratives of superiority.

Separate from both the Zhigoneshi Collective and Western documentaries, *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* are films produced by non-Indigenous Colombian filmmakers in a transnational context. Produced in the periphery of Western filmmaking and outside of the Indigenous communities they represent, can *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* contribute to the project of decoloniality and embrace decolonial aesthetics?

Dreams and (de)coloniality: the on-screen representation of Amazonian and Wayú culture

As confirmed by Guerra, a thread between *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* is the importance given to the theme of ‘dreams and the subconscious’ (Guerra, 2015). Concerning Indigenous communities and coloniality, dreams and the subconscious have a complex history. Mary Campbell notes that with a loss of epistemological prestige associated with dreams in the seventeenth century, much of colonial Europe began associating dreaming with savagery and primitivism (2014: 2). In this way, dreams became intertwined in the process of othering and were subjected to ethnographic research seeking to prove the inferiorities of Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies and cultures. The colonial act of othering that associated dreams with savagery and ‘primitive’ culture continued throughout the colonial and post-independence periods of Latin America until the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century. The renewed importance, although controversial, of the subconscious and dreams in Western epistemology led to a global philosophical and artistic focus on subconsciousness and dreams. Beginning with the publication of the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924 by André Breton and leading to the development of ‘lo real maravilloso’ posited by Alejo Carpentier in 1949, dreams became central to debates surrounding primitivism, exoticisation, and coloniality.

On the one hand, although claiming an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial political agenda, Louise Tythacott confirms that the juxtaposition made by surrealists between conscious and unconscious became infused with the notion of primitivism and the exoticisation of non-Western and Othered cultures (2014). Indeed, these artists, most notably Pablo Picasso, sought to employ ‘primitive’ cultural aesthetics to shock and subvert Western rationality. The idea that dreams and the unconscious could more easily be enunciated through non-Western aesthetics supported and reproduced colonial discourses of exoticisation. Thus, many of the artistic movement’s anti-colonial claims were undermined by the appropriation of non-Western culture.

This contradiction is what Alejo Carpentier famously highlights in his prologue to *Kingdom of this World* (1949). In this prologue, the Cuban novelist critiques how surrealism, as a Eurocentric discourse, regards the distinction between supernatural and natural or dreams and reality as concrete.

For Carpentier, when applying surrealism to a Latin American context, the boundary between rationality and irrationality becomes blurred to the point that dreams and reality are inseparable. He famously labels the region's history as 'a chronicle of the marvellous in the real' (1949: xi). With the subsequent development of the term into magical realism during the literary boom in Latin America during the 1960s, aided by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes, a more nuanced understanding of reality and dreams came about. As discussed by Schroeder, there is a contested set of definitions for magical realism and the magic real (2004: xv); however, without wishing to simplify the discussion, both can be closely aligned with decolonial aesthetics. Despite claims by David Foster and Rosita Scerbo that these literary styles are mired in the continued exoticisation of Latin America and hyper-masculinity, the denunciation of coloniality and Eurocentricity are at the heart of the magic real and magical realism. In addition, magical realism and the magic real's fusion of dreams and reality present new ways of being and knowledge. This is why academics like Jonelle Frazier align these styles with decolonial aesthetics (2018).

Ultimately, dreams and the unconscious have, and continue to be, interrelated with coloniality, decoloniality and Indigenous representation in Latin America. The two films, *El abrazo* and *Pájaros*, represent the border between dreams and reality in a way that contributes ambiguously to decolonial aesthetics. To evaluate the films' relationship with decolonial aesthetics, this discussion examines the role of dreams in creating an intercultural dialogue in the films' narratives and the onscreen representation of dreams.

By demonstrating the importance of dreams in Indigenous epistemologies, the two films intertwine traditionally Western and non-Western storytelling genres to create an intercultural dialogue and, in doing so, appeal to decolonial aesthetics. When discussing the role of the intercultural dialogue in the narrative structures of the films, it is important to understand what is meant by interculturality, a contested term in decolonial discourse. The origins of the term interculturality or *interculturalidad* began with Indigenous activism focussing on the negative results of neoliberalism in Colombia and across Latin America. Functioning as an ideological principle used by the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC) in Colombia and several other representative groups for Indigenous communities in Latin America, *interculturalidad* represented a pathway to 'the radical building of new societies using an 'other' social ordering' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018: 34). In this sense, it was a complimentary political, epistemic and experience-based project closely related to decoloniality. During the 1990s, the term was hijacked by Eurocentric and Western supranational organisations such as UNESCO and became a neoliberal pacifying instrument. In other words, the term came to be used in a top-down fashion that reproduced colonial relationships between the West and the 'other' in a way that invoked a Western superiority.

Nevertheless, the term used in a bottom-up manner continues to promote permanent and active negotiation between Western and non-Western ways of being and interrelating, whereby the direction of interchange is not one-sided. Establishing an intercultural dialogue when creating the narratives of *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* that simultaneously employs and deconstructs Western methods of storytelling appeals to *interculturalidad* as a decolonial practice.

As a film that follows the journeys made by Karamakate and two western scientists Theodor Von Martius and Richard Evans Schultes, *El abrazo* can be associated with road movies, a 'quintessentially Hollywoodian genre' (Chris Berry, 2016: 3). Several notable contemporary Latin American films have adapted the road movie genre from a Western paradigm to fit national contexts across the region. By referencing key characteristics such as an exploration of frontiers and the discovery of self, Niamh Thornton discusses how the re-inscription of the road movie genre by recent Latin American filmmakers is an attempt to represent an 'authentic' view of the continent (2007: 34). Thornton highlights how encounters with contemporary Indigenous subjectivities in films like *Y tú mamá también* (Cúaron, 2002) and Guerra's second feature *Los viajes del viento* (2009) are used to

show a ‘real’ view of Mexico and Colombia. In this way, it seems unsurprising that *El abrazo* correlates with the road movie genre by exploring the Amazonian frontier and documenting the (re)discovery of Karamakate’s, Theodor’s, and Schultes’ self.

In many respects, the film is a ‘roadless movie’ as coined by Nátalia Pinazza (2018: 34), where the characters are carried by dreams rather than cars or motorcycles. For example, Theodor von Martius’ inability to dream and his rejection of the dream world prevents him from finding his destination and instead results in his death. In contrast, by learning how to dream, Richard Evans Schultes can guide himself and Karamakate to their destination. In addition, dreaming enables Schultes to prevent the protagonist from losing the memory of his culture and becoming a *challuaqui*. In this way, dreams become ‘central to the narrative’ (Guerra, 2015). Re-formulating the Western mode of storytelling and infusing it with the value of dreaming in Amazonian Indigenous culture, the film establishes an intercultural dialogue that destabilises colonial discourses of superiority. In addition, by recounting the narrative through various Indigenous languages in the film, including ticuna, cubeo, uioto, and guanano, the Hollywoodian paradigm of road movies is subverted even further.

Similarly, the more recent *Pájaros* can be categorised into several traditionally Western literature and film genres, but a hybridised narrative structure is created using dreams and the subconscious. For instance, the significance granted to dreams in Wayúu culture is intertwined with film noir, western, and tragedy elements. For example, as discussed by Zuluaga, the narrative follows a classical Greek tragic structure with the film divided into five songs or *cantos* entitled Wild Grass, The Graves, Prosperity, The War, and Limbo. This division into five sections is typical of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. In addition, *Pájaros* reflects tragedy by demonstrating key characteristics from the genre, such as hamartia and the peripeteia. These two classical terms denote what can be understood as the tragic flaw and the reversal of fortune. Suppose the film’s protagonist is understood to be the Pushinao family and their cultural traditions. In that case, their tragic flaw is entering into a deal with drug trafficking *alijunas* or outsiders and prioritising capital gain over upholding cultural practices. Similarly, their reversal of fortune comes at two main points, their decision to attend the exhumation of a cousin and the moment when Leonidas, the youngest son of Úrsula, sexually abuses the daughter of their extended family. The eventual death and destruction that follows the Pushiano family are reminiscent of a classical tragic ending.

In addition to referencing tragedy, Kovarik notes that the narrative structure is also rooted in the Wayúu *jayeichi*, a traditional song established to transmit history and knowledge through generations (2019). The fact that this form of Wayúu storytelling is focused on the intergenerational transmission of language and culture is an intriguing choice, given that the film centres around the loss and death of culture. Indeed, overlapping two distinctly Western and Indigenous modes of storytelling creates an intercultural dialogue between the two. What conjoins both the *jayeichi* and Western tragedy in the film is the symbolic role of dreams in driving the narrative.

Within the Wayúu culture, dreams are a significant guiding presence in the community's day-to-day lives. In *Pájaros*, the matriarchal figure of Úrsula interprets dreams and informs critical family decision-making. For instance, one of the dreams she must speak to is one of her daughter, Zaida’s visions. This dream engages in the imagery of Zaida’s Grandmother, who is captured in a wide-angle medium-long shot holding a lamb on the boundary between the land and sea. According to Úrsula, the vision means that outsiders will call upon the community and could endanger the family. However, in a similar fashion to Theodor in *El abrazo*, it is in failing to respect symbolism in this dream that the Pushiano family meet their tragic end. The location of this dream is also in a symbolic marginal landscape of the coastline and connotes a particular in-between space. In this way, the dream is represented as situated between consciousness and subconsciousness and between Western and non-Western modes of storytelling.

Ultimately, by inducing an intercultural dialogue using the motif of dreams and the subconscious, Guerra aims to ‘build a bridge between Western and non-Western storytelling’ (2015). In this way, the narratives in both *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* appeal to the discourse of *interculturalidad* and align themselves with decoloniality and decolonial aesthetics.

Although dreams and the subconscious play a significant role in creating intercultural narratives in both films, the onscreen representation of these dreams and their engagement with the concept of decolonial aesthetics is questionable. Primarily, it can be seen through the presentation of Schultes’ psychedelic dream at the climax of *El abrazo* that colonial aesthetics of the sublime are reproduced rather than deconstructed. As confirmed by Maria Chiara D’Argenio, the only scene not shot in black and white is the dream at the end of the film, which begins with aerial shots of the Amazon rainforest captured using drone technology. A certain technological fetishism, coupled with a colonial view of looking down on the rainforest, sits at odds with the film’s efforts to subvert the colonial gaze. By inciting ideas of an unimaginably vast natural space and the imposition of strict surveillance and control, the beginning of this climatic scene employs a colonial way of viewing and mapping the rainforest. There are several ways in which these extreme long shots and aerial shots are reminiscent of Werner Herzog’s controversial depiction of the Peruvian Amazon and the Indigenous communities that inhabit it in his emblematic film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). Indeed, D’Argenio confirms that these films’ efforts to critique the inadequacy of Western knowledge in understanding the Amazon reproduce the very colonial aesthetics of the sublime they wish to undermine (2018).

Moreover, following these aerial shots, the dream sequence of highly colourful moving patterns and shapes is a spectacular and exotifying reimagination of Indigenous Amazonian creation stories. In trying to articulate the story referenced by Karamakate in an early conversation with Theodor, this sequence is a visual depiction of *the embrace of the serpent*. As the only scene that includes any colour, let alone vibrant and fluorescent hues, it becomes noticeably separate from the rest of the film. Indeed, representing a generalisation of Amazonian Indigenous culture in this way is reminiscent of the ethnographic spectacle, a key symptom of colonial aesthetics. Fatima Rony defines the ethnographic spectacle as how film, specifically ethnographic cinema, depicts Indigenous and non-Western communities as exotic and anachronistic (1996: 12). This dream sequence scene is so noticeably spectacular due to its contrast to other dreams represented in the film. For example, different dreams, such as Theodor’s vision of a jaguar, are shot in black and white and are sonically indistinguishable from the diegetic rainforest sound throughout the film. The seamless transition between Theodor’s dream and the preceding scene appeals to magical realism and the magic real where dreams and reality are inseparable. Conversely, the visually and sonically explicit transition from reality to the dream at the film’s climax undermines the magical realist idea that dreams and reality are inseparable. The eye-catching introduction to the dream occurs when Karamakate’s mouth and eyes swallow the camera with a pulsating and ambient noise soundtrack. Delineating between fantasy and reality subverts the ways in which previous references to magical realism aim to critique colonial aesthetics. In other words, the onscreen representation of dreams in *El abrazo* engages inconsistently with decolonial aesthetics.

The representation of a Wayúu family in *Pájaros* avoids cultural homogenisation and generalisation issues. However, there are several ways in which the culture is exotified. Despite working closely with the Wayúu anthropologist Weilder Guerra Curvelo, the film’s representation of dreams and other cultural practices incite notions of the ethnographic spectacle (Rony, 1996). The most noticeable imagery of exoticisation is seen in the film’s opening scenes, densely packed with ethnographic imagery associated with the Pushaino family. Indeed, there is a stark contrast between the colourful cinematography, costume, and sound at the start of the film and the minimalist design and subdued colour scheme of the barren Guajira desert at the end. As confirmed by the lead cinematographer David Gallego, the colour saturation of the picture ebbs and flows throughout the film, matching each chapter’s mood (2018). Initially, the audience is subjected to a dramatic and eye-catching *going to*

dance that is fraught with movement, music, and an array of ‘colours commonly associated with the Wayúu’ (Guerra, 2018). The vibrancy of this sequence is elevated through the soundscape, which is characterised by the extra-diegetic music from the traditional wind instruments *sawawa* and *wotoroyoi*. Additionally, the tracking camera movement that follows the dance routine with close-up shots of the characters is striking, considering that there were concerted efforts made to let the ‘action establish a strong rhythm of its own’ (Gallego, 2018). The vibrancy of the Wayúu culture and its traditions and the potential to enunciate it onscreen were highlighted by Cristina Gallego. The co-director stated that there were (2018):

‘unos códigos de comportamiento que los hacen más interesantes y lo que queríamos era contar la transformación de una sociedad tradicional’

(codes of behaviour that make them more exciting, and what we wanted was to tell the story of the transformation of a traditional society).

This quotation supports the argument that the representation of Wayúu culture was subjected to the ethnographic gaze simply because of its noticeable ‘otherness’. Lina Britto also notes that very little historical evidence suggests any significant overlap between the Wayúu communities in the north of Colombia and the rise of drug trafficking in the second half of the twentieth century. In this sense, it seems that the Wayúu were chosen to tell the story of the loss of culture because of their vibrant and exotic cultural practices rather than their real interactions with drug culture in Colombia.

The problematic onscreen representation of the Wayúu culture also occurs in one of the film’s key dream sequences. For instance, figure B shows Zaida’s grandmother wearing a vibrant, eye-catching, patterned dress. Despite accurately portraying the traditional dress of the Wayúu, the imagery and mise-en-scène in this sequence are reminiscent of Magritte’s surrealist artwork *The Lovers* (1928). According to cinematographer Gallego, this artistic intertextuality is not accidental. However, establishing a conversation with surrealist aesthetics as a way to enunciate dreams and reality does invoke notions of ‘primitivism’. In other words, by referencing the surrealist movement in a way that portrays Indigenous and non-Western culture, the film runs the risk of entangling itself with the cultural appropriation often associated with the Eurocentric movement.

Overall, the onscreen representation of Amazonian and Wayúu culture through the enunciation of dreams and the subconscious results in a problematic sense of cultural appropriation. In this way, subjecting these cultures to a level of exotification sits at odds with the filmmakers’ efforts to create an intercultural dialogue. Indeed, the decolonial process of interculturality is undermined by the onscreen ethnographic spectacle that propagates colonial discourses of Western superiority.



Figure B, a still from a dream sequence in *Pájaros de verano* (Guerra, 2018) ©Ciudad Lunar

Decolonial promises and a Colombian reality

Despite their ambiguous relationship with decoloniality, these films explicitly aim to enunciate Wayúu and Amazonian Indigenous subjectivities in a way that is both accurate and respectful. Indeed, according to a final intertitle in *El abrazo*, the film was a dedication to ‘all the peoples whose song we will never know’ (Guerra, 2015). By representing Amazonian and Wayúu culture in globally recognised films, it would be assumed that the release of these films would support these communities economically, culturally, and politically. Casting sixty local Amazonian subjects in *El abrazo* and nearly half of the cast for *Pájaros* being Wayúu, for example, would seem financially fruitful. Additionally, as two regions that rely heavily on tourism as a source of income, an eye-catching depiction of rural indigenous communities was hoped to expand profits from the industry for the communities (Opsina, 2018). Furthermore, actor Antonio Bolívar Salvador, who played the older version of Karamakate in *El abrazo*, stated that a screening organised for Amazonian communities successfully incentivised greater inter-generational transmission of language and culture (Matheisen, 2016).

Nevertheless, despite promises of economic and cultural benefits for these communities, there is little empirical evidence that the release of the films has created meaningful change for the Wayúu and Amazonian communities. For example, according to a recent Human Rights Watch investigation, the Wayúu community has been suffering from severe child malnutrition, with around one in ten children born in the area over the last three years dying from the condition (2020). Since the release of Guerra’s fourth feature film, there has been an estimated decrease in tourism value in the Guajira region by thirty per cent (DANE, 2018). A similar trend can be seen in the Colombian Amazon, where the importance of tourism in the regional economy has only grown by two per cent in the three years following the release of *El abrazo* in 2015 (DANE, 2018). In addition to the economic losses

experienced in both regions, the death of the actor Antonio Bolívar Salvador was among a long list of Indigenous people who have suffered disproportionately from the spread of covid-19 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Indeed, the fatalities experienced by Indigenous communities have resulted in a halt to language preservation and revitalisation programmes which is set to result in the extinction of around thirty endangered languages in the Amazon region alone (Villa, 2020).

Beyond the pandemic, in April 2021, many Indigenous communities, with the support of the CRIC, organised protests in response to what they called ‘state terrorism’ aimed explicitly at Indigenous subjects (Villa, 2020: 12). This state terrorism referred to allegations that there was a systematic massacre of Indigenous activists during the most recent presidential period of Ivan Duque. Similarly, the rest of the presidency was marred by an inadequate response to Indigenous executions by drug cartels, such as the Clan del Golfo, and his mismanagement of the invasive presence of multinational extractive companies such as Cerrejón (Villa, 2020).

Ultimately, the global success of *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* has not since translated into the desired benefits for the Indigenous communities that they represent. Both premiered at the Director’s Fortnight section of the Cannes film festival and won several awards at Western festivals, such as the Art Cinema Award at Cannes. In addition, both films were selected as Colombia’s submission to the Academy Awards and have since been uploaded to the global streaming services Amazon Prime and Netflix. However, the distressing data demonstrates how Indigenous communities in rural locations have not profited from the release of contemporary Colombian cinema.

In contrast to the limited contribution made by these films in increasing the socio-political and economic agency of Indigenous communities, the outcome of the recent presidential elections in Colombia has heralded a lot of hope. Gustavo Petro will be Colombia’s first left-wing president, and the next four years could mark a significant turning point in the future of the Indigenous socio-political agency. Promises made by the president-elect are far-reaching and aim to confront ecological concerns associated with oil and gas extraction, reignite the seemingly endless war on drugs, and incorporate a racially and socially diverse governmental cabinet. For example, Francia Márquez will be the first Afro-Colombian to hold the position of vice-president. There are also plans to include three significant Indigenous leaders in the cabinet (Villa, 2020). To follow through on its promises, Petro’s government claims it will support the implementation of the fourteen contested Indigenous Territorial Entities (ITEs) in the Amazonian region of the country. Similarly, in an attempt to reform the country’s relationship with oil and gas extraction, there are pledges to partner with Wayúu communities in setting up solar-powered farms in the Guajira region.

Whether or not these promises become a reality is yet to be seen. If there is a significant change in the country over the next four years regarding Indigenous socio-political agency, perhaps the films studied in this project will come to hold new meanings for the Wayúu and Amazonian Indigenous communities. In other words, if the more immediate socio-economic and political issues these communities face are resolved, the practical ramifications of decoloniality and contemporary cinematic representation may become more visible.

In conclusion, this discussion has explored the relationship between the representation of Indigenous communities in *El abrazo* and *Pájaros* and the ongoing global project of decoloniality. By establishing a contemporary context of Indigenous socio-political agency in Colombia, this project has demonstrated that while attempting to engage with decolonial aesthetics, neither *El abrazo* nor *Pájaros* is yet to provide any tangible benefit for Wayúu and Amazonian Indigenous Peoples. Nevertheless, this limited impact should not diminish the decolonial project’s potential effects as a social, political, economic, and cultural movement. Indeed, the extent to which contemporary cinema, or decoloniality for that matter, will play a practical socio-political role in Colombia will be interesting to observe, particularly over the next four years.

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