



Camilo Restrepo, Esto es una pipa, 2009

## Martyrs

Santiago Rueda

In the last three decades, Colombia has become a country that is under continuous threat by illegal forces of all ideological stripes. Thanks to the financial support they receive from the drug world, these forces have successfully challenged the Colombian state. Big multinational companies and the financial establishment have profited greatly from every aspect of the endemic world of drugs, reaping benefits through the laundering of assets, the traffic of chemicals, herbicides, and weapons, as well as the financing of undercover military operations.

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Braian Cadena, *Vecinos invisibles*, 2009

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Although political debates always revolve around the prohibition drugs, the problem of drug addiction, which is both a public health issue and one of the harshest expressions of the ways in which capitalism and consumer society function, has been seldom understood and studied. The frameworks through which our marginalized youth shape their identities, which range from the indolence of gangster culture to the *sicario* (hired assassin) and the military combatant, exclude the frenzied figure of the indigent drug addict. Thousands of nomadic people, often contemptuously called *ñeros*, *chirris*, or *chirretes* (variants of lumpen), live in the cities of Colombia. These are young people that have fallen into the illness of drug addiction yet remain invisible: they do not form part of state programs to eradicate coca crops, do not receive state support or sentence reductions, nor are they offered assistance to demobilize or reinsert themselves in society. The system of capitalist accumulation regards the physically and mentally disabled figure of the *bazuco* (cocaine paste, crack, and other derivations) addict as a disposable, non-productive entity, even though his existence only perpetuates the substance that consumes his life. In a country where health care has been privatized, the *bazuco* addict is excluded from receiving virtually any form of medical assistance and treatment for his disease. The possibility of being cured is hence reduced to the assistance of a small number of organizations, which are generally composed of former street persons who dedicate their limited means to helping these drug martyrs. Who claims today the rights of the victims in whose name the war against drugs is supposedly fought? Who represents them when, as the crusade against anti-state subversives in the last two decades has shown, refugees and victims end up paying the price for their assailants' crimes?

## Street Dwellers

The cities of Colombia have a long history of runaway children who take refuge in the streets. Since the beginning of the twentieth century,<sup>1</sup> this theme has been represented in literary, caricature, and photographic form, depicting a lifestyle specific to urban traditions, as can be seen in “Entierro de un colega” (“Burial of a Friend”), a photograph published in the journal *Revista Ilustrada* in 1900, as well as in the photography of European travelers such as Ernst Rothlisberger<sup>2</sup> and Erwin Schottlaender<sup>3</sup> and in Luis B. Ramos’ drawings.<sup>4</sup>

In the second half of the century, this theme continued to be explored through works such as Merino’s caricatures and one of the few comic strip characters created in Colombia: *Copetín*. But it is not until the 1970s, with the country’s massive urbanization and the creation of the so-called 70/30 investment ratio, that the image of the *gamín*, or street urchin, emerges as one of Colombia’s most problematic and exploited icons. The films *El cruce* (*The Crossroads* 1969), *Gamín* (1973), Ciro Durán’s homonymous *Gamín* (1978), the photography of Alfonso Ángel, Jorge Silva,<sup>5</sup> and Félix Tisnes<sup>6</sup> do not stray too far from Luis Buñuel’s representation of inescapable social misery and violence in his film *Los olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned* 1950).

However, this interest in images of testimony or social denunciation and the tragedy of the *gamín* in film as well as in the visual arts and photography disappears in the following decade. The decline coincides with the rise of drug and bazuco use among Colombian urban youth, which spreads like a plague during the early 1980s. This plague produces a world of clandestinity, invisibility, and disavowal and a new illness whose brutal symptoms include lung, skin, and liver damage, cerebral atrophy, psychosis, and schizophrenia. The surge in drug consumption and human degradation coincides, in turn, with the wealth increase of the principal drug lords, who dominated the political order in Colombia from the presidencies of Virgilio Barco Vargas and César Gaviria Trujillo and reached their peak during Álvaro Uribe Vélez’s presidency. This arc confirmed the predications made by Jaime Garzón, later disappeared. In 1993 Garzón declared:

Drug traffickers are a lumpen-bourgeoisie that has embedded itself in our social scheme [...], it has increasingly become more powerful, and will in the end establish its own regime in ten or fifteen years, that is, in ten or fifteen years the Rodríguez Gachas will become the Rodríguez Guccis.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, this lumpen-bourgeoisie intensified the zone of terror inherited from the *pájaros* and *chulavitas*,<sup>8</sup> with the aim of subjecting and eliminating the political opposition, as in the case of the UP (Unión Patriótica) and peasant movements, through intimidation, selective

assassination, and the terrible paramilitary massacres, which remain unpunished to this day.

As Margarita Jácome notes, the chemical and moral destruction of youth in Colombia is circumscribed within,

the hegemony of drug traffic culture, which has had a growing influence on society, neutralizing or assimilating emergent forms of countercultural youth expression while normalizing languages, practices, and beliefs that, as the illusion of consumerism shows, give the false impression of being modern. In fact, they take us deeper into the past, the rural, and the world of adults and further away from the future, the urban, and the youth world.<sup>9</sup>

## From the Perspective of Art

Even though numerous works have engaged with issues such as political corruption, illegal organizations, drug legalization, the eradication of coca crops, and aerial fumigation, the arts in Colombia have seldom addressed the question of indigence and drug addiction. Between 2002 and 2005, Jaime Ávila focused on the subject of street people addicted to *susto* (cocaine paste) in *La vida es una pasarela* (*Life is a Runway*), a bleak series of frontal photographic portraits in which indigents are illuminated by means of a system of electric lights that can be detected through holes in the photographic paper.

According to Natalia Gutiérrez:

Ávila's work is not about a carnival or youth gangs that invade the public space to somehow claim their rights, as we have repeatedly seen in films, but about lonely individuals that walk down the runway separately, with a heightened sense of individuality, in a performative moment in which they play to be socially integrated.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Ávila notes: "urban indigence is a sinister thing, the national anthem's satanic chorus, which turns the condor into a vulture, abundance into cocaine, glory into decay, and honor into murder."<sup>11</sup>

In 2009, Braian Cadena shot a series of video interviews and portraits—etched on spoons with acid—of Bogotá's indigents: *Vecinos invisibles* (*Invisible Neighbors*). As Cadena explains:

[...] most people consider street people to be just another element of the urban landscape, like its cars, trees, iron posts, streets, or to put it more explicitly, like the dust or dirt that contaminates the city. Perhaps this is the reason why it is commonly thought that they are the closest beings to the features of dust.<sup>12</sup>

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Cadena is interested in our indifference and inertia towards street people, recognizing them as subjects who have partially lost their identity as persons. Both *Life in a Runway* and *Invisible Neighbors* provoke the following questions: What traditions of family and social exclusion link the *chino de la calle* (street urchin) to the contemporary figures of the gamín and the ñerito? What desire for freedom has been thwarted and turned into a condition of physical and psychological subjection? What leads the subject to autodestruct himself? What new form of martyr is the drug addict?

In 2008, Camilo Restrepo began to collect and photograph the makeshift pipes used by addicts in Medellin. Restrepo explains:

I collected around a hundred pipes used for smoking bazuco in three of Medellin's biggest *ollas* (drug zones): pipes made from disparate objects that were not originally created for smoking: mechanical pencils, felt-tip pens, syringes, PVC tubes, vials, small plastic containers, rubber bands, plastic bags, etc. The use and abuse of these pipes, which are made in different styles and sizes by the drug addicts themselves or are sold in the *ollas*, has ended up *personalizing* and differentiating these objects even more.<sup>13</sup>



Camilo Restrepo, *Esto es una pipa*, 2009

The series *Esto es una pipa* (*This is a Pipe*) alludes explicitly to Magritte's 1928-29 painting *The Treasury of Images* (*This is Not a Pipe*) and Michel Foucault's essay on the relationship between images, words, and objects, which he dedicates to the same painting. Restrepo's images stimulate questions about notions of use, function, artifice, drama, tragedy, and beauty, indicating perhaps that, beyond the logic of prohibition, the problem of both legal and illegal drugs has been scarcely understood. The drug addict implodes in the abyss of his illness, but he is also a subjectivity that escapes rationalization, a test pilot of unknown experiences who lives in a parallel reality. Which leads again to the question: what collectivities, desires, and forces does the drug addict embody?

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In *Drugs, Psychosis, and Institutions*, Felix Guattari declares:

Those who end up in the most catastrophic conditions are frequently the best individuals, due to their determined rejection and their will to assert themselves at any price. They are not those who owe the most to society, life, and speech, but those who struggle most violently against obstacles [...] They are the bearers of the most intense problems and those who should provoke reflection the most in society, public authorities, and the political class.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Baudrillard affirms:

When a collective loss of immune defenses or an individual loss of symbolic defenses occurs, some societies become vulnerable to terrorism, drugs, and violence [...] Yet, we can consider drug consumption differently, in the opposite way to be exact: at the same time that it forms part of an autoimmune syndrome, it constitutes a form of defense. There are of course better defenses, but it is not impossible to consider its use and abuse as a vital, symbolic reaction, even if it appears to be desperate and suicidal, against something that is even worse.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond these facts, a suspicion remains. As William Burroughs and Philip K. Dick point out respectively in *Ghost of Chance* and *A Scanner Darkly*, public health drug policy may be a sinister method of social control, a form of criminalizing, isolating, and “psychotizing” individuals and society. In the same way that global pandemics raise questions about how big pharmaceutical companies manipulate medications and illnesses, there are many uncertainties surrounding the role of the dominant powers in the drug war, as exemplified by police tolerance of hard drugs in post-Franco Spain as well as in African American communities in the United States during the 1980s. As Burroughs notes, in the drug pyramid, “each level devours the one below it up to the highest level or levels, because there are many drug pyramids feeding themselves on the people of the world and all of them are built on the basic principle of monopoly.”<sup>16</sup>

At the crossroads of the war against drugs, which sometimes seems to be a one-way street, Colombia contemplates a future of “permanent fumigation, elusive cooperation, impossible legalization, and intermittent militarization;”<sup>17</sup> the creation of a profitable panopticon of paranoia and destruction constructed around the phenomenon of drug addiction. Currently, the questions are more interesting than the answers, and we should recognize in numerous ways the existence of street people because, as Guattari asserts: “the data on drugs—which in fact are strange in statistical terms—is just an extreme depiction of issues that in fact exist everywhere. We are all drug addicts, with the basic difference is that we are not addicts in the same degree or fashion.”<sup>18</sup>

*Translated by Kahlil Chaar-Pérez*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “El Chino de Bogotá.” In AA VV *Museo de cuadros de costumbres II*. <http://www.lablaa.org/blaavirtual/letra-c/cosii/cosii21.htm>. Accessed in May, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> His drawings appear in his book, *El Dorado*.

<sup>3</sup> Published in *Cromos* in 1935.

<sup>4</sup> Muñoz V, Cecilia y Pachón C, Ximena. 1990. “Los chinos bogotanos a comienzos del (1900-1930).” *Bogotá*. Edición 12. Diciembre.

<sup>5</sup> His works between 1970 and 1974 deal with this subject. In 1973, Silva began an extended research project on the ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Well-Being) homes where these children were housed.

<sup>6</sup> Tisnes, Félix. 1990. *Fotografía Contemporánea II*, no. 12: 22-26.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQXgvph-F3Q>

<sup>8</sup> The *pájaros* constituted an illegal conservative force that committed many of Colombia’s state crimes during the 1950s. The *chulavitas* was the police force during the conservative presidencies of Mariano Ospina Rodríguez (1946-1950) and Laureano Gómez (1950-1953).

<sup>9</sup> In Margarita Jácome, “La Novela Sicaresca: Exploraciones ficcionales de la criminalidad juvenil del narcotráfico.”

<sup>10</sup> Gutiérrez, Natalia. 2009. *Ciudad-espejo*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia. p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Cadena, Braian. *Vecinos invisibles*. Unpublished text.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Guattari, Felix. Rolnik, Suely. 2006. *Micro política. Cartografías del deseo*. Mapas, Madrid. 297.

<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. 2000. *Pantalla total*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama. págs. 113/118, <http://www.con-versiones.com/nota0514.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Burroughs, William. , 1980. *El almuerzo desnudo*. Editorial Bruguera, Barcelona. p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Tokatlian, Juan Gabriel. , 1997. “Política pública internacional contra las drogas de la administración Gaviria y las relaciones entre Colombia y Estados Unidos.” In *Drogas ilícitas en Colombia*. Bogotá: PNUD-DNE. 461-533.

<sup>18</sup> Guattari, Ibíd.

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