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**HUMOUR SANCTIFIES HORROR**

**Humour and Laughter as Social Venting in Colombian  
Photography**

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**Humor a Smích Jako Forma Sociální Ventilace  
v Kolumbijské Fotografii**

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## **D e c l a r a t i o n**

I declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis independently on the following topic:

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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Acknowledgments:

*To my father, who has always listened to me.*

*To my mother, who has always supported me.*

*To my brother, who has always believed in me.*

## **Abstract**

The thesis analyzes a growing aesthetic tendency in Colombian photography based on humour and laughter as a form of social venting. The main characteristics are depiction of social division, poverty and violence, and use of mockery, counterfeits and cheap materials.

This thesis begins with a general overview for which author proposes a term "Macondian Photography" and follows with analysis of the work of three particular artists active over the period starting from 1970 till 2018. They are Paola Rojas, a fine art photographer and winner of Colombia's National Photographic Award that; El Chino, personal photographer of Pablo Escobar, and Luis Ospina, one of the proponents of the pornmiseria movement.

Investigation shows the use of satiric, humor and burlesque elements to reflect over serious, violent or stressful situations in Colombia. It also demonstrates a connection with the literary movement "Magic Realism" and one of its founders' writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Results also reveal influences that Europe and North America had on Latin American artists and how they stepped away from these tendencies to create a form of representation of Colombia's cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Colombia, Joke, Humour, Aesthetics , Latin America, Photography

## **Abstrakt**

Práce je analýzou vzrůstající esteticke tendence v kolumbijské fotografii založené na humoru a smíchu jako formě „sociální ventilace“. Tuto tendenci charakterizuje vyobrazování sociální nerovnosti, chudoby a násilí spolu s vysměchem a levnými či náhražkovými materiály.

Práce začíná obecným přehledem tendence, pro niž autor navrhuje název macondská fotografie, a pokračuje analýzou tvorby třech konkrétních umělců z rozmezí let 1970 a 2018: Paola Rojase, fotografa a držitele kolumbijské Národní ceny za fotografii, El China, osobního fotografa Pabla Escobara, a Luise Ospina, jednoho z proponentů hnutí známého jako pornomiseria.

Výzkum tak představuje využívání satiry, humoru a burlesky jako formy reflexe závažných společenských témat v Kolumbii v letech 1970 až 2018. Odhaluje přitom souvislosti s literárním hnutím „magického realismu“ a dílem Gabriela Garcíy Marqueze, poukazuje na evropské a severoamerické vlivy a zároveň na to, jak se latinoameričtí umělci od těchto vlivů emancipovali, aby vytvořili formy reprezentující kolumbijskou kulturní identitu.

**Klíčová slova:** Kolumbie, vtip, humor, estetika, fotografie, Latinská Amerika



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**Vedoucí/Supervisor:** Josef Ledvina.

**Oponent/Opponent:**

## INTRODUCTION

The thesis focuses on a tendency in Colombian photography that uses humour and laughter as a form of social venting with examples over the period starting from 1970 till 2018. This work studies photographs as a result of activities, patterns and visual codes that are mixed with humour, joke or jocular activities as a social escape. The main characteristics are: depictions of social division, poverty, the comic, the use of cheap objects with counterfeit, mockery; cynicism and burlesque. This thesis develops the idea that aesthetic is influenced by society and cultural environment and they are not three different elements but a conjoint result of personal experiences.

The thesis also studies the relationship between society and Colombia's writer and founder of Magic Realism Gabriel García Márquez, awarded Nobel Literature Prize in 1982 for his novel *One hundred years of solitude*<sup>1</sup>. Several of his stories are written in a jocular tone with a sober mood. Literary theorists call his style Magic Realism<sup>2</sup>. In *Cultural Bulletin Number 158, 1996* of Madrid, García Márquez wrote "*They (the critics) say that I have invented magical realism, but I am only the notary of reality. There are even real things that I have to throw away because I know they can't be believed.*" The genre and the writer had some influence, directly or indirectly, on photographers in Colombia because of the circumstances they were born and raised in. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a

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<sup>1</sup> *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the most famous novel written by the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, published in 1967, which tells the story of the Buendía family and their descendants, who, crossing the mountains, along with other families, settle in a deserted place in the Caribbean to found the town of Macondo.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Strecher defines magic realism as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe" it is a literary movement. It is not a magical literary expression, its purpose is not to make emotions, but, rather, to express them. It is an attitude, venting towards reality. Its features include: A. Content of magical / fantastic elements, perceived by the characters as something normal B. Magical / strange elements in the scene and sometimes never explain why they are there. C. Presence of mysticism or faith as part of the perception of reality. D. In terms of space, it is located in the hardest and crudest levels of poverty and social marginality, spaces where the magical, mythical conception is present. E. The facts are real but have a fantastic connotation, since some have no explanation, or are very unlikely to happen.

book that every senior year student have to read before graduating. It is a reference for Colombian culture and ideology.

The text compares García Márquez's fictional work mainly with the theorist Edward Goyeneche in his book "Photography and Society"<sup>3</sup> where he explains photography as a social practice<sup>4</sup>, and also with Jennifer Higgin's book "The artist's joke" where she reunites thoughts of theorists, psychologists and philosophers working on the topic of the laugh, comic, caricature and jocular elements in arts and culture.

As a result of this relationship, the tendency will be named in further pages as "*Macondian Photography*". Macondo is the fictional location where "One Hundred Years of Solitude" takes place which it is a product of the fantasy and imagination of García Márquez. In Colombia, *macondian* is a philosophy based on a jocular and colloquial way of thinking.<sup>5</sup>

The methodology of the investigation of this thesis follows the selection of an artist, the trajectory of making the picture, influences and the personal

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<sup>3</sup> E. Goyeneche describes relationships between photography and society in Colombia until 1950 with photographs taken in "studio" over this period of time and the importance of the process of taking the picture for the photographer, the person photographed and the relationship with the industry back in the days. Photography and society. (Goyeneche, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> "Social practice is a theory within psychology that seeks to determine the link between practice and context within social situations." Smolka, A. L. B. (2001, P. 362-367)

<sup>5</sup> In Colombian culture and jargón, Macondiano relates to the fictional town called Macondo. Literary universe of plots and characters that appear in some works by the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. It is said of situations or cases of fantastic or incredible appearance but of authentic nature. It has a poetic construction and vigorous fantastic images, characteristic of the writer Gabriel García Márquez. It is derived from magical realism, but differs from it in that it involves the presentation of historical or true events, but in ways that seem fanciful.

The word "Macondiano" has been used for several years, including by intellectuals and writers, apart from the general public and media.

background in society and culture including their social relations. Sources mentioned in these pages are academic as well as some media clippings.<sup>6</sup>

The first part of the thesis is divided into two chapters and states the main hypothesis of the whole investigation. It is based on the analysis of the movement with support of some interviews with artists. It also explains the characteristics and the basis of the work and how the hypothesis was constructed with strong emphasis on the space where the photo was created. At the end of the first chapter, the thesis analyzes with one example the explicit problem between Colombian society, jocular elements and the movement itself and its social meanings.

The second part emphasizes the social representation of the humour and joke in photography. Terms such as magic realism, poverty, vernacular photography, catholic creed are compared with the meaning of "*pornmisery*" and the work of Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo in their documentary "The Vampires of Society".

The third part of the thesis analyses the movement in documentary photographs where there is a balance between chaos and clarity, seriousness and laughter with the example of El Chino, personal photographer of Pablo Escobar. The thesis explains the indirect influence of him and his pictures in this movement with the circulation of his images in Colombian society.

The fourth segment justifies the influence of Catholicism and religion in Colombia's contemporary photography and their strong impact on

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<sup>6</sup> The general concepts - social sciences related - that have been used in this research are, Jennifer Higgle: The joke of the artist. (2007) E. Gombrich: Uses and representations of images in society and visual communication; Joan Fontcuberta "Photographic Aesthetics"; Pierre Bourdieu: Uses, functions and social meanings ". In "A medium art ", Gili Barcelona 2003. Howard S Beecker" Artistic world "that integrates the concepts of social activity, social division of labor and mobilization of resources In "Art Worlds", Berleey, University of California Press, 1982; Pierre Bourdieu "field and artistic code in the rules of art, Genesis and field structure", Anagrama, Barcelona 2002 (1995) John Berger "Way of seeing in ways of seeing "Barcelona, gili 2002", (1974) and Michael Baxandall, Cognitive style in painting and daily life in the revival, Barcelona, Gil, 200 (1972).

photographers. For this, we will analyze the work of Paola Rojas, a Colombian national photographic award winner, and one of her interviews. In this chapter, we consider the relationship between the tangible photograph, the caricature and the symbolisms on other areas of the society such as advertisement and politics.

To conclude, the thesis explains the influence that *Macondian Photography* had on photographers and the main conclusions of this research.

## CHAPTER 1

*Humour sanctifies horror.*

This chapter analyses the relationship between portraiture and humor in Colombia. It questions the definition of the photographic studio and the "aura". Also, it examines the visual codes of pictures, including the process of taking the photo.<sup>7</sup>

*"Humour has not received the attention that deserves in consideration of the role it plays in our mental life."* wrote Sigmund Freud in 1905 (Jokes and their relationship with the unconscious, p. 3). Few writers took this topic as something relevant. It is ironic; humour is not considered as a subject for a serious study. The joke is a useful resource in several cultures. It activates repressed impulses including the relationships of power, gender and sexuality. People use it to denounce problems in social classes, displacements and even ideologies.<sup>8</sup>

The humour is a form of expression in society. People use it to escape complex and difficult situations and also to have hope. According to Lipps, (Komik und Humor, 1898, p. 49-50) a joke is *"something comic which is entirely subjective. In order to emphasize these and make them accessible to aesthetic*

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<sup>7</sup> With some exceptions like E. Goyeneche and his studies in photography of studio. Most of the analysis that people do relies on describing the image, when it is actually worth to research about the production factors that made the photography possible. Besides, if we study the photography only analyzing its aesthetic, we will abandon the social and historical meaning of the Photographic experience.

<sup>8</sup> As a political and cultural example in Colombia I analyze images and results of the national strike of November 22, 2019. In a column of Semana Magazine, the writer Daniel Samper makes an analysis of laughter and humour in relation to the strike. The results, in addition of being funny, they show a way of representation. "Is the protest comparable to what has happened in Chile, Bolivia or Ecuador? (the massive protests in Latin America following the awakening of the people in the face of corruption) I anticipate the answer: no; Because we are in Colombia. And only in Colombia happen things like 1. a man complains on his Instagram stories and the filters changed his appearance." 2. That some kidnappers take a bus on public transport and go out to party on it -it looked like a Mad Max scene-. 3. That 20 policemen are not able to catch a thief who assaulted a supermarket. 4. That they have invented a type of marketing: "protest-marketing" (a street seller of energy drinks, takes advantage of the national strike to create advertising for the brand with which he works) D. Samper. Semana magazine. Column: Things that only happen in Colombia. 2019.

*consideration, a force is necessary which is able not merely to imagine objects directly but itself to reflect on these images and to clarify them: a force that can illuminate thoughts. The only such force is judgement. A joke is a judgement which produces a comic contrast”.*

Colombian culture uses humor as a shield over drastic corruption and social inequalities. It also acts as a naive witness under violent circumstances. As the Writer Daniel Samper wrote *“It is like laughing with a broken rib. A laugh with a lot of pain but over the fear, we will always be able to set above everything: hope”* (D. Samper, 2019).

Portraiture is “a photograph of a person that captures his personality by using effective lighting, backdrops, and poses. It tries to gather the qualities of a person whether they are physical or moral” (Francis, 2007, p. 341) The artists mentioned in this research use portraiture as part of their artwork. The thesis examines their workflow including the pose, gesture and styling. It focuses on the background of the person: who are they? what do they do? why are they dressed like this? what makes them come to the studio?

Peter Burke (The portraiture: mirror or symbolic form? Eye witnessing The uses of Images as Historical Evidence, 2001, p. 25) defines portraiture as a *“pictorial genre where there’s usually symbolism on the elements represented. Most of the times, portraiture tends to present the model in a specific way, mostly favorable”*. Additionally, there is a relationship between social, cultural status and influences. As Giovanni Moralli said: *“If you would like to understand... history... you should look carefully at portraits. In people’s faces there is always something of the history of their time to be read, if one knows how to read it.”*

*“Macondian Photography”* uses humoristic elements, satiric or absurd, that shape Colombia’s idiosyncrasy. These elements are a representation of the cheap and popular in general culture. The photographer uses wretched,



vernacular objects and counterfeit to make a statement and it is common to use slight sexual connotations in the pictures<sup>9</sup>.

Besides having a photographic studio, photographers can use another place for shooting. The space matches the definition of Magic Realism. It locates on some of the hardest, raw places where social marginality is seen. Spaces, where this magic conception is, present in the people's way of thinking.

There are some collective rules that delimitate what is allowed, or not, to photograph. It is not allowed to photograph people being stabbed and show it as something funny. The comical elements need to contain some kind of innocence or hope, where the violence is not the priority but it is in the environment itself. Jennifer Higgin describes these elements as "*playful judgments*". There is a relationship with the "*European taste*" that influenced this movement in the cities"<sup>10</sup>. Under these rules there is a combination of commercial photography and the artist statement in the work<sup>11</sup>.

As Bordieau mentioned: "*aesthetic is also a social conjunction consequence of a social circle*"<sup>12</sup>. Most of these photographers were born in the middle class. There is a mutual work between the photographer and the person photographed as they help each other to make a critical statement<sup>13</sup>. Sometimes the person photographed is a leader in art, politics or culture.<sup>14</sup> This supports Freund's

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<sup>9</sup>John Tag, when he says that photographers produced, on its use and praxis, collective meanings, accepted on social and historical conventions. (John Tag. *El peso de la representación*. Cit., p.9.)

<sup>10</sup> Colombia has already established, since the arrival of the photography to the country, a "renaissance" vision, based on photographic perspective. (Laura González. *Fotografía y pintura, dos medios diferentes?*)

<sup>11</sup> E. Goyeneche. *Photography and society*. Cap 5: Lo fotográfico.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bordieau, *The rules of art*. P. 55

<sup>13</sup> As E. Goyeneche mentions in *Photography and Society*: "the photographer Félix Nadar was not Nadar because of his great aesthetics but because of the people he photographed." (P. 25) G. Freund also talks about it in his book "*Photography and society*" where she exposes the first cases of Parisian photographers when the "*Cartes de visites*" came to replace old photographic practices.

<sup>14</sup> Besides, there's a strong relationship with Howard Becker and his definition of "Artworld" the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint

investigation about the evolution of photography that was conditioned by the praxis of the “*middle class*” and its upcoming growth, even if, at the beginning, the buyers were related to the aristocracy<sup>15</sup>.

A studio is a place where the picture is taken. According to Goyeneche, “*the studio shall be understood as a social space and could be mutable*”<sup>16</sup>. It depends on the circumstances the image was produced: how, where, why and what was taken. In 1982, Becker (“*Art Worlds*”, Berleey) talked about the network in the cooperation between the photographer, the gallerist and the photographed in *Art world*. The studio can be a piece of a room, the street, the city, even an atelier. It’s not a surprise that many artists want to create things about experiences they lived, because ultimately, that is the experience they have.

We cannot consider “*Macondian Photography*” as part of a traditional aesthetic like pictorialism, purism or documentary<sup>17</sup>. First, pictorialism was born with the need to see photography as an art form. In this type of aesthetic, the photographer is considered as an artist with much more importance than his technical equipment<sup>18</sup>. Pictorialists usually apply some effects in the development process such as nitric acid or the gum bichromate. Besides, they strictly rejected amateur photography and the arrival of Kodak instant shots. “*Macondian Photography*” is not allowed to be called pictorialist because its aesthetic is a consequence between the experience and the social interactions

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knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce(s) the kind of art works that art world is noted for (Becker, 1982)

<sup>15</sup> Raises another interesting question about the type of photography we are studying. Because it is not a purely commercial photography and that it is slightly inclined to the taste and concept of the photographer and not of the photographed one, it is therefore more inclined to be artistic photography and allows more freedom of individual creation.

<sup>16</sup> Understand the photographic space of the studio photo (as a social fact) The photographic studio is a conventional social space whose purpose is to portray the visible and take the invisible for granted. I visited it, in this case it would be the waiting room and the place of taking and the invisible could be in fact and among others the revealed. (Goyeneche, 2008)

<sup>17</sup> Goyeneche proposes that purism and pictorialism are aesthetic codes and therefore existed before the invention of photography. The two aesthetic codes are explained as social inventions with the aim of classifying photography.

<sup>18</sup> Joan Fontcuberta. *Photographic aesthetics*. P 74.

of the photographer. Besides, in "*Macondian Photography*", it is possible to use instant photography and post-production skills, although is not required.

Nowadays, pictorialism uses digital manipulation and praxis to achieve new post process effects. Quoting Elizabeth Marín, Argentinean theorist and professor:

"The question of pictorialism as an alteration of reality, finds new echoes within the current processes of rearranging photographic signifiers and their images from the processes of digital manipulation, where it resurfaces with another force in the saturation of appearances, and the excess of representation that enunciates the critique's account of the fragmentary scenes presented in the technological drift of a world saturated with images, produced and reproduced to satiety". (Marín, 2017)

Documentary photography consists of pictures taken with social purposes. With documentary photography, people register and inform about forms and living conditions<sup>19</sup>. Even though "*Macondian Photographs*" have an interest in portraying, the scenarios might be completely fake, recreated or might be a *mise-en-scène*.

Documentary photographs are made with the purpose of informing. In "*Macondian Photography*", photographs might inform but sometimes, there is no specific purpose of taking the picture, rather register the moment. Besides, we found humour. The laughter, the jocular in this case, can be seen as something funny, fun or something that doesn't belong with the image. Sometimes it does not even match and the viewer just tends to laugh, as he does not understand why that element is placed there. This action can be done in violent contexts (but no violent actions) and vernacular environments. It could be the city itself but seen out of the context of reality.

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<sup>19</sup> (Company, 1979): American Photographic Book Publishing Company inc, Editions Grammont S.A., and Salvat Editores, S.A.,1979.

What is the social value of portraiture photography in Colombia?

As E. Goyeneche explains that "*Being photographed gives art, status, and elegance. It goes to the sphere of social and conventional representation*"<sup>20</sup>. Does it make sense to go to a photographic studio to be portrayed in a way, different from who we are? As the author explains: "*the way we see things is filtered over a social and cultural context*" (Goyeneche, 2009). This social and cultural context is present in the story, costumes and social circle of the photographer.

In Colombia, there are inconsistencies in social classes coming from several mistakes caused by the nation leaders. Misery and poverty are seen as something natural, sometimes it is not even noticed. There is an inclination to reproduce copies that sometimes looks very cheap and an idiosyncrasy with a leaning to have hope and faith.

We can resume this praxis as a form of portraying Colombia's reality in a way that is not that cruel. Colombia "*sanctifies*" horror in order to see face-to-face reality; that is the reason why magical or fun resources are used and sometimes they are very jocular. This is why we are not only analyzing the pictures of these creators but also their education and socialization<sup>21</sup> and their relationship between the evolution of this standard European - American style to an autochthone art.

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<sup>20</sup> E. Goyeneche. *Fotografía y sociedad*. P- 120. La Carrera Editores.

<sup>21</sup> It is as if, some ways that they were born in Europe came here and we made them our own with our symbols and our "social eyes", a describes by Edward Goyeneche in *photography and society*, Social Eyes is a term that describe how people perceive their own society and how this way of seeing affects their creations. E. Goyeneche. *Fotografía y sociedad*. La Carrera Editores.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Macondian Photography*

In these pages, I will apply Umberto Eco's definition of visual codes to explain the origins of these patterns and how to read them on the images. Another term used in this chapter is the sociological definition of "imaginary"<sup>22</sup> to analyze the elements in the scene that are visible through the image and that are invisible but still present with the work made a priori of taking the image.

Umberto Eco describes visual code as a "*specific system of communication between individuals, which uses its own and ordered signs in a temporary and hierarchical and particular way.*" (Eco, 1968, p.167) <sup>23</sup> What are the visual, artistic codes that contain the aesthetic of "*Macondian Photography* images"? Important social contrasts. We see them on the image, in the biography of the photographer or in the circulation of the physical- tangible picture.

People from Colombia were in touch with violent events or lived in times of terror in the country. All Colombians had to live a different "social trauma" such as the guerillas<sup>24</sup>, the cartel wars<sup>25</sup>, massive migration<sup>26</sup>, forced displacement<sup>27</sup>, pyramid scheme<sup>28</sup>, etc.

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<sup>22</sup> The imaginary (or social imaginary) is the set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols common to a particular social group and the corresponding society through which people imagine their social whole. It was created in 1960 by Edgar Morin. (Morin, 1956)

<sup>23</sup> Umberto Eco: The missing structure. Visual Codes p. 167

<sup>24</sup> 50-year war with the FARC guerrillas that ended (and resurfaced again) with the peace agreements signed in 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Cali cartel war with the Medellín cartel (whose leader Pablo Escobar is known as a great antihero worldwide).

<sup>26</sup> The displacement of thousands of people through guerrilla battles with paramilitaries.

<sup>27</sup> The massive migration of Venezuelan people caused by the dictatorship of Nicolas Maduro created a deep social and economic crisis in the country.

<sup>28</sup> In November 2008, a pyramid scheme caused an economic crisis in southern Colombia. Data from the Economic Observatory of Pasto revealed that, in the first half of 2008, the Department of Nariño lowered its productivity by 4.1% as well as consumption, especially in food, groceries, liquors and, in general, the food industry. Which, it is presumed, is due to the phenomenon of the pyramids (especially Proyecciones D.R.F.E. and DMG) with a great activity in Nariño.

Despite the changes, the daily life of Colombians remains disturbed by violence showing diverse and profound *horrors*. It is inherited from the times of the Spanish colonization but nowadays we can see it in social activities. Especially, the ones found in the *comunas* (very poor neighborhoods) and other miserable spaces located on the periphery of the main cities. They reflect the unequal distribution of wealth and social ascent. In these places there is usually a lot of crime often linked to drug trafficking, which sometimes is linked to the corruption of the forces of public order which leads to the absence of help from political elites and civil society.<sup>29</sup>

And what did Colombians do with the display of violence? Besides trying to fight against it every day, they made several movies to avoid romanticizing but sanctifying, laugh about these horrors and adapt them into the culture. One of them, the movie "*La Vendedora de Rosas*"<sup>30</sup> got nominated for the award "La Palme d'or" in Cannes, France. All of the castings of this movie were natural, non professional actors, and most of them are now in jail or they died.

"*La vendedora de rosas*" is one of the most iconic and pop culture movie for most Colombians. It remains in the memories of the people to show the inconsistencies in social classes. Most of the people use the movie characters to make memes<sup>31</sup> and to transform the meaning of its original one, just as explained in John Berger's text "Ways of seen" (1973, p.21), where he makes a

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<sup>29</sup> For example, 3rd world countries paint their houses in bright colors to distract tourist and people from poverty. It's called Slum Paintings. Several artists have participated in this "color therapy" like SPAG photography with his project Share the Word, where he painted houses of Bogota, Kathmandu and Nairobi. (Zaremba, 2016) Even if it's a clever idea, it doesn't change the fact that the architecture, houses and living conditions are low and ironic to the context.

<sup>30</sup> IMDB, 1998. 13-year-old Monica leads a street life, making her living by selling flowers to couples in local nightspots, she is joined by 10-year-old Andrea who runs out of her house after her mother beats her.

<sup>31</sup> The concept of the Internet meme was first proposed by Mike Godwin in the June 1993 issue of Wired. In 2013, Dawkins characterized an Internet meme as being a meme deliberately altered by human creativity—distinguished from biological genes and his own pre-Internet concept of a meme, which involved mutation by random change and spreading through accurate replication as in Darwinian selection. Dawkins explained that Internet memes are thus a "hijacking of the original idea", the very idea of a meme having mutated and evolved in this new direction.

statement about the transformation of the meaning of the original art piece when it is reproduced several times.



meme, popularized on 2019 about co- star of La vendedora de Rosas on cover of fictional Vogue – Medellin.

Jean Paul Richter in *School of Aesthetics* (1804) also speaks about the relationship between joke (jocular) and society: “*The ultimate proof that the joke needs a society and its stimuli, is that it needs general culture to be understood*”<sup>32</sup> (Richter, 1804). The general culture is focalized and generated through aesthetical movements and choices of representation in the image.

Is it in Colombia’s idiosyncrasy to laugh about horrors? The invention of photography allowed to visualize the culture around a society. People became more interested to show how they live, how they act, how they are and somehow, find some acceptance. Photography connected society with the modern word<sup>33</sup>. (Marín, 2017) Results can be funny or with slight humour in it. However, it might not be the intention of the photographer to make us laugh. It

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<sup>32</sup> Jean Paul Ruchter, *Vorschule der Aesthetik (School of Aesthetics)* (1804) part II, paragraph 51.

<sup>33</sup> Marin first studio over this topic was in the Biennale of photography in Buenos Aires. She studies the evolution of pictorialism in latin american cultures with the post processing instead of revealing in the dark room.

might only be the cynicism that surrounds the photo itself -that is jocular- and therefore, the viewer sees it that way.

There are also characteristics that are not cynical but meaningful: the playful judgements that surround the picture.



*Personal archive of Ana Estela Calderón. A picture of her mother, Manuelita Moncayo.*

Let's analyze the characteristics of the joke, the copy or imitation over portraits, specifically, the studio photographs with its construction of the European vision in Colombia. A picture of a Colombian man, middle age; thin, middle height with big hands and peasant characteristics. He walks through downtown streets to a photographic studio. It could be a special occasion, or not. He is dressed as a young peasant, like the famous picture of August Sander ('Young Farmers', August Sander, 1914, printed 1996). Black suit, light tie. We can see that the suit is a little big for him as it is not made for him, it seems *rented*. Nevertheless, it does not stop him from being proud of wearing it. Even if the "European suit" gives him some status of an "English man" we can definitely recognize he is not one.

Does it stop this young man from being proud of being photographed? No, it does not at all. The young man does not care. This copy -rented suit- imitation and jocular elements are taken so seriously that the people do not take it as



humoristic. But the most curious affirmation is that, this is not a man of whom we are talking about, it is a woman. It is overall a playful judgement. In some cases, even women were dressed in men suits so they could have more status or *"impose some trends"*.



*Ms. Manuelita Moncayo. Personal Archive of Ana Estella Calderón*

What social values does the photography above have? What is the reason to dress like that? Could it be considered at that time as something funny for people? Is the experience of being photographed a sign of identity? In *"Jokes and its relationship with the unconscious"* Freud analyzes the characteristics of jokes made by several artists:

*"activity, relation to the content of our thoughts, the characteristic of playful judgement, the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, "sense in non sense", the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment the bringing forward of what is hidden, and the peculiar brevity of wit - all this. It is true, seems to us at first sight so very much to the point so easily*

*confirmed by instances that we cannot be any danger of underrating such views. But they are "disjecta membra" which we should like to see combined into an organic whole.*" (Freud, 1905, p. 5)

Is it possible to represent in a simple portrait of a woman how the hierarchy of society works?

The previous photographs are not something to laugh about. However, they have some elements that, once analyzed, make us think that there is a *playful judgment* going on. It is also important to know that, as Goyeneche explains, in 1950, Colombian society constructed and modified with frequency the idea of what was artistic.<sup>34</sup>

The European vision and taste influenced Colombian photography. Even in our modern times, society is still looking for it. This vision is also in architecture and paintings that wanted to look "European" but most of the time they ended up being copies that look cheap or mannerist. This "cheap look" was incorporated in the way people lived and therefore in their "*way of seeing*"<sup>35</sup> society based their own characteristics in the representation of copies or cheap objects placed with other luxury elements on the scene.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This becomes stronger in a country and at a time when art - of the fine arts - did not develop as strongly as in Europe.

<sup>35</sup> The notion of way of seeing was built by art historian Jhon Berger. For him the visible does not exist by itself, but is a "set of images" that the eye creates when looking. The visible is an invention, product of a cultural mediation. Berger says "*We do not know of any realm of the visible that maintains the control of its sovereignty by itself.*" This means that cultural models affect the way we see things. And in that sense "every image embodies a way of seeing" that is Social and that both the producers and the consumers of the image possess. The ways of seeing are produced by society and are determined by it, but at the same time they determine it to the extent that they correspond to the agents' own vision. That correspondence is based on relationships and social values. (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.)

<sup>36</sup> As mentioned before, houses of low- income neighbors are affected by this hypothesis too. Sometimes the people not only paint the houses in bright vivid colors, but they also make graffiti-murals artworks. Was the idea of painting these houses like this from autochthone people or is also a copy or European styles?

As a critical statement, there are not many examples of commercial photography -covers of magazines – that can fit on the aesthetic of "*Macondian Photography*". It can be related to the desire of some photographers to copy the canon of European standards. Sometimes, those covers of magazines look like copies of worldwide renowned magazines<sup>37</sup>. Nevertheless, I have to exclude from these photographers, the work of Camo Aguilera and the evolution of his artwork through his project "*Etnofiction*".

*Etnofiction* is a "*neologism that refers to an ethnographic documentation, a mix between documentary and fictional movies in visual anthropology. It's a type of fictional, argumentative or creative narrative, sometimes even improvising, characters that are represented (natives) play their own roles as a member of a ethnical – social group*"<sup>38</sup>.

Camo is a photographer that works in Colombian editorial sector. Before *Etnofiction*, he mainly worked in fashion photography. His work has been recognized by some worldwide brands like Elle<sup>39</sup>. Since 2016, Camo started a project called *Etnoficción* where he uses normal people photographed with purely Colombian elements but posing as if it was fashion photography. It could be considered as a hybrid between fiction, reality and appropriation<sup>40</sup>.

Camo was born in Cartagena, a place where there is an important contrast between poverty and richness. Fighting against the *machismo* he saw around when he was a kid, he flew to the capital city of Colombia, Bogota. Camo's

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<sup>37</sup> "Colombian photocopies" website was created, showing the extensive similarities of some covers of fashion magazines, especially with some from abroad. It won the national journalistic award: Simon Bolivar. <http://fotocopiascolombianas.blogspot.com/>

<sup>38</sup> Jean Rouch is considered the father of ethno-fiction. An ethnologist, discovered that a filmmaker interferes with the event recorded. Your camera is never a sincere camera.

<sup>39</sup> Elle Magazine. Camo Aguilera's photos revealing Colombia's new face. Link: <https://www.elle.com/culture/art-design/news/a4550/camo-aguileras-photos-reveal-colombias-new-face-204/>

<sup>40</sup> Here I would like to make a punctual note about the reconstruction of the idea of the artistic. How do we naturalize the culture of individuals? When this "pastiche" of photographic aesthetics and embodiments, I remember a lot about the treatises of time; of the relative value depending on what we use. It reminds me of *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann that although it is fiction it is totally applicable to the context.

photographic studios are the streets of Cartagena. He portrays and shows to the world what is happening with the people of his hometown: *"That's why I moved to fashion photography because I could talk about our social problems but I can camouflage them as editorial content"*. (CAMO, 2020) Camo's photographs uses the market he works in to make visible the problems of society.<sup>41</sup> One of the most particular element of his work is the "Aura" of the people photographed.



Camo. *Noli Mentangere*

In one of his latest works for Fucsia magazine, *Camo* decided to combine his work "Etnofiction" with a commercial approach. The result is a highly aesthetic work, with *playful elements* that show a real vision of Cartagena's high contrast. No one will ever think that a cheap plastic chair will look more powerful than other elements in the picture. In the same interview, *Camo* speaks about how funny it was for the non-model to be standing there, also because the bikini she is wearing (the single piece) costed 1 000 euros.

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<sup>41</sup> But industry should not be confused with market. Photography was not always industrialized but photography was always part of a market. There were some social benefits of taking a photo.

*"After exploring, artists tend to document. And you can document in a real way or in a fictional one. In this case, I document something fictional but I exposed a reality. You have to do something with these photographs. You have to release a publication on the internet or other media, so you can reach an audience with them. The methodology is an intersection of an aesthetic that you can see in Vogue Magazine or in National Geographic". (CAMO, 2020)*



*Camo, Etnoficción en La Boquilla*

However, the way the article was written tried to sell "haute couture" bikinis with an autochthone woman surrounded by poverty:

*"Inspired by visual anthropology, Fucsia Magazine entered the mangroves near one of the most visited beaches in Cartagena to witness the authentic beauty of its natural landscapes, the faces of those who inhabit it and their routines, to put in scene the key piece of summer: the patterned bikini."*  
(FUCSIA, 2019)

These images are not meant to make us laugh. Camo used photography and *playful elements* to create a critical discussion. What people see at first in the image is definitely not the bikini but the combination between the woman, the high contrast and the dress pieces (that don't belong there). *"Aura is not in the aesthetic per se, it is in the person who is photographed, the model, because there's already a persona on him/her (...) one of these characteristics is the pose and how suggestive it could be."*<sup>42</sup>. (Goyeneche, 2009)

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<sup>42</sup> The pose can also mean roughness and unnaturalness of the person does not have an aesthetic taste of their own. For example, with the social classes of the French bourgeois in the book by Giselle Freund, it first emphasizes what was happening with photography at the time. The history of Western photography is very similar country to country and we can speak widely of the influence of Europe in photography in Colombia. As Freund says in his book "The photographic image that remained of the distinctions (and their aesthetic taste) became an aesthetic reference that much of society continued to look for itself".

### CHAPTER 3

#### The Rebellion of Human Zoos.

Pornmisery describes the abuses of marginality and conditions of sub development in third world countries with the purpose of selling them on different continents as something exotic and rare. It is usually done to catch the attention of foreign audiences.

It was used for the first time by Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, two Colombian filmmakers who made a critical statement in the 1970's. They created the fake documentary "Agarrando Pueblo" (Ospina & Mayolo, 1977) (translated in English as "The vampires of society") and explained the term *pornmisery* in the speech of the première of the documentary in "Action Republique" in Paris.

*Agarrando Pueblo* is a "fictional film that simulates being a documentary about filmmakers who exploit the misery with mercantilist purposes. It is a scathing criticism to "porno-misery" and the opportunism of the dishonest documentary making "socio-political documentaries" in the third world to sell them in Europe and win prizes"<sup>43</sup>. It follows the story of two young filmmakers that go to the city of Cali, in the south of Colombia, to shoot in the poorest neighborhoods and quarters. Sometimes they are helped by the police. The movie finishes with the actual footage of a fake drug addict asking the director if his acting was good enough for the camera. Back in the 1970's, the documentarists used to make photographs and films that reproduce this voyeurism for poorness. *Agarrando Pueblo* changed this approach on filmmakers.

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<sup>43</sup> *Agarrando Pueblo* (The vampires of society) on IMDB. Extracted from: [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0225033/plotsummary?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_pl](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0225033/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl)



Shot of Agarrando Pueblo (*The vampires of society*). Directed by Carlos Mayolo & Luis Ospina

The voyeurism for “exotic” cultures or curiosity to check how other people live in other countries is not new. The past century had Human Zoos. Also called “ethnological expositions”, the Human Zoos were exhibitions done in the 19th- and 20th-century that often emphasized the cultural differences between Europeans of Western civilization and non-European peoples or with other Europeans who practiced a lifestyle deemed more “primitive”. According to Abbatista, and Lannuzzi:

*“Several types of living ethno-exhibitions certainly aimed to show impressive, repulsive or frightening savage, primitive forms of human life, displayed in all their supposed brutality and intended as evidence of racial inferiority, emphasized by nakedness, bestial gestures and behaviors, rude performances, and physical appearances suggesting radical otherness. In many other cases, different objectives inspired different languages.”<sup>44</sup> (Abbatista, 2016)*

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<sup>44</sup> Abbatista, Guido and Giulia Jannuzzi, World Expositions as Time Machines: Two Views of the Visual Construction of Time between Anthropology and Futurama. *World History Connected* 13.3 (2016): 48 pars. 18 Mar. 2020 <[https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.3/forum\\_01\\_abbattista.html](https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.3/forum_01_abbattista.html)>.





*"Les Gallas au Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation",  
postcard of the exhibition organized by Carl Hagenbeck in 1908, Paris.*

Abbatista and Lannuzzi (Abbatista, 2016) traced some of the possible causes of the creation of these exhibitions. In this study, I would like to underline three of them. The first and most significant is the importance of displaying human "otherness". The second is the overseas expansionism of colonialism. And the third is the growing impact of visual and performative culture due to the socially inclusive nature of mass spectacles.

Even some years have passed since this documentary aired, there is still a tendency working directly with the topic of pornmiserism. It is not, exactly, the idea of making a spectacle out of misery but to show reality as it is. Presenting extreme poverty as something normal in a third world country was fascinating for documentarists. Mayolo's and Ospina's speech mentioned related terms between human zoos and pornmiserism:

*"They (outsiders) shamelessly try to portray a distressing circumstance and caricature it. They think they are in a zoo visiting lesser-off species, seeing the lion that has fallen from grace, the sick monkey, and the faded peacock. They are firmly convinced that misery is exotic, strange, fascinating. They feed on it as parasites." (Trujillo, 2017)*

One of the most renowned documentaries of Colombian filmmaking history is the 1970's documentary "Gamín" (1979) directed by Ciro Durán. It is described and parodied by Mayolo and Ospina as one of the examples of pornmiserly.

*"Gamín is based on three segments showing the gamines mostly displaced in the violence and their families, to live on handouts of people, of the theft of windshield, car radios, recycling cardboard and stealing several streets but above all of the pure Centre of Bogotá to the gamines re-grouped in "galladas" sleep on platforms, bus stops and in the now defunct "Calle del Cartucho". (Durán, 1979)*



shots from *Gamín* (DURAN, 1977)

According to *Proimágenes*, the company in-charge of audiovisual records in Colombia, the topics of movies in Colombia between 1970 and 1990 include poverty, catholic traditions, drug dealing, conflict with the guerillas and agriculture. Furthermore, documentaries and fictional movies about the history of Colombia and its leaders (including indigenous communities), cultural exploration of dance, gastronomy and lifestyle are also included (ProImágenes Colombia, 1978).

Awarded an internationally recognized documentaries include *"The Abandoned Children"* (LYON; 1975) and *"Nuestra voz de tierra, memoria y futuro"* (The voice of our land, memory and future translated in English language) (Rodríguez, Silva; 1982). This brief list relates to the principal characteristics that the showcase of Human Zoos brings.

The ideas of the expansionism and colonialism are closely related to the meaning of getting to know other cultures. Pornmisery came a long time after Human Zoos and it is the living proof of the evolution of this concept with different methodology. In English, pornmisery is a counter-response of the so-called "exploitation film"<sup>45</sup> which is closely related to exploitation fiction<sup>46</sup>. This brings into consideration Susan Sontag's thoughts about how the middle classes saw poverty as seductive in art.

Indeed, Sontag was also interested in showcasing this attraction: "*Photography was an instrument of that essentially middle-class attitude, both zealous and merely tolerant, both curious and indifferent, called humanism – which found slums the most enthralling of decors*"<sup>47</sup>. It is one of the hypothesis of this investigation that underlines that, with pornmisery, there was an intention to approach the interests of an international audience and filmmakers who saw an opportunity by exposing these topics.

However, in the third topic (the growing impact of visual and performative culture), I would like to invoke what was developed after Agarrando Pueblo's work, and study the concrete case of "La vendedora de Rosas". One of the most recognizable works in Colombia's film industry, that includes a controversial point of view, is the filmmaker Victor Gaviria's movie "La vendedora de Rosas" (1998). Gaviria was criticized for bringing pornmisery back on the screens. However, there is a debate about how he wanted to expose this topic. If we analyze the attitude of the people in his movies and shots, none of them seems

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<sup>45</sup> An exploitation film is a film that attempts to succeed financially by exploiting current trends, niche genres, or lurid content. Exploitation films are generally low-quality "B movies". Schaefer 1999, pp. 42-43, 95.

<sup>46</sup> Exploitation fiction is a type of literature that includes novels and magazines that exploit sex, violence, drugs, or other elements meant to attract readers primarily by arousing prurient interest without being labeled as obscene or pornographic. (Pulp, Exploitation, Noir & Melodrama. Wayback Machine. Article in TYSTO, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130211032950/http://www.tysto.com/articles04/q2/20040504pulp.shtml>)

<sup>47</sup> SONTAG, 1977. On photography. P 55 -6

sad or miserable. They seem, neutral, used to their living conditions and somehow grateful with what they have around.

In *Pacifista* (Trujillo, 2017), Juan Trujillo analyses Gaviria's work, calling it a reflection of the reality "without make up". Juan describes it as a society that "*silently coexists with the ruthless*", even if their characters live partially adjusted to their own reality as they don't graphically complain about it. I want to add to Juan's reflection that Gaviria's work is ironic and works accordingly with the intention of adding playful elements on the screen in the visual part and the dialogues. It is not my intention to say that Gaviria's work is funny, or a comedy, but there are cruel topics seen by the viewer with irony. The force of these playful judgments is that they come from lower classes, from the roots of the people. And when they are triggered and accepted, they end up being the roots of the culture.



*Theatrical release poster of "La vendedora de Rosas"*

To conclude this chapter, the emphasize should be put on the ethical value of pornmiseria. Dunne (2016, p. 49) writes on "*Pornmiseria and photography in Colombia*" that "*if we do not get to see on screen themes such as poverty, the theme began to disappear in the conscience of people*". The important value of

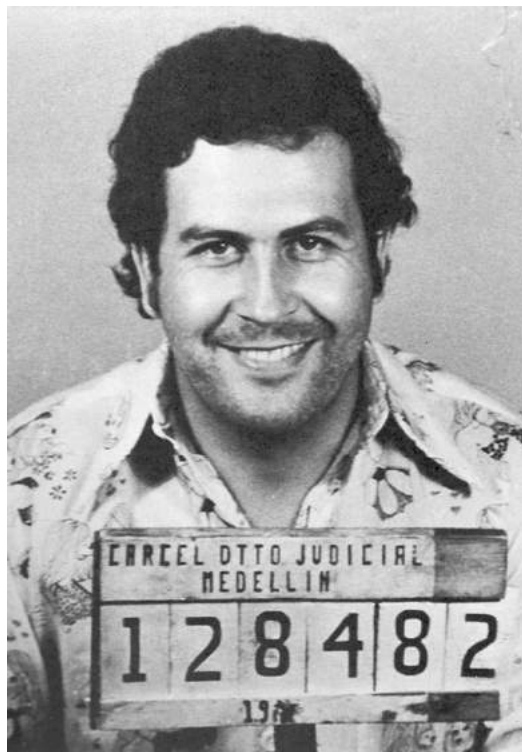
showing this on-screen is to make people understand the social differences and to accept to construct a better world and society.

“Pornmisery” is not in the actual image but an intention. There should be an idea of poverty, cruelty and social differences that are able to be greater than the “exotic voyeurism” that *pornmisery* relies on. It is the intention of the photographer/filmmaker when he makes the film that classifies his work in pornmisery or not. It is the recognition of the space as a social scenario and how the *filmmaker* plays with the elements that lead him to make something different. Victor Gaviria, as mentioned before, is an example of overpassing pornmisery and showing reality, as it is. Camouflaging social issues with punchlines so people can show some issues in a society that is looking every day for a change. A very *macondian* style.

## CHAPTER 4

Explaining the Chaos: El Chino, personal photographer of Pablo Escobar.

This chapter analyzes how "*Macondian philosophy*" is also involved in documentary photography and also to prove how it can be a strategy to tell stories about the Colombian conflict. For this, the chapter use the example of "El Chino", the personal photographer of Pablo Escobar, and compares it to interviews of National and international media with the book "The artist's joke" by Jennifer Higgin.



*Photo of Pablo Escobar when he entered jail in Colombia*

Pablo Escobar was the leader of Medellín's Cartel, the most infamous drug-dealing association in Colombia, who terrorized the entire country in the period between the 1980's and 1990's. They are well-known for their constant fights with Cali's Cartel and their businesses with illegal drug trade selling, mostly cocaine and marijuana. Pablo Escobar is considered nowadays as an icon in popular culture due principally to TV fictional series. He is also well known

because of his presence seven years in a row as one of the wealthiest person in the world (Forbes, 1987) and, of course, his relationship with drug dealing<sup>48</sup>.

His ironic and satiric attitude in every picture shows his political and economical ambition. The proof of his power was the mass murderers in the country such as the bomb explosion on Avianca's Airplane (where the president was supposed to get in, but canceled before he jumped the plane) and the massive terrorist attack to the buildings of the national newspaper "El Espectador" where he blew up the entire building. Due to his economical power and social support, anyone who was against him would mostly end up dead.

In the time where Pablo became known, Colombia, especially his city, Medellin, was going through a hard economical crisis due to a despicable management and administration. Pablo was, for many people, a hero that saved the city and their people, creating whole neighborhoods and giving houses to the people in need. Under moral and ethical reasons, Pablo cannot and shall not be seen as a heroic figure.

Edgar Jiménez, better known as "El Chino", is commonly known as the personal photographer of Pablo Escobar. Both born in Medellín, Pablo employed his former 1960's primary school classmate after a meeting in the 1980's. El Chino was working as a wedding photographer. Under Escobar's period, Edgar Jiménez was able to photograph parties, private reunions and the intimate life of this antiheroic star. It is also important to mention that his most recognized photography work is from this time period.

As listed on Pablo Escobar's information website:

*"Escobar recruited El Chino to become his personal picture taker, documenting his political campaigns, his private parties, and the various*

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<sup>48</sup> Watch, for example the first three seasons of *NARCOS* from Netflix or *ESCOBAR*, the boss of evil, from Caracol TV.

*goings-on at Escobar's outlandish 4,500-acre estate, Hacienda Nápoles. El Chino spent the next decade in Escobar's employ, enjoying total access and fussing over which of the drug lord's associates was open to having his picture taken. This continued until the CIA, Los Pepes, Delta Force, Search Bloc, and a bunch of other people who wanted Escobar's head on a platter converged to dismantle the Medellín Cartel." (Pablo Escobar Gaviria foundation, 2017)*

The photographs of El Chino captured important moments very connected with the social inequality of those years but they also revealed two sides of the same coin. In one side a society, stressed and deformed by the presence of Escobar and his illegal business but, on the other hand, his most human face; people having fun and laughing of its own misfortune. That was his "studio" or place to work. This balance ends up having a very ironic, satiric connotation, with playful elements related to the cynical characteristics of this movement mentioned in Chapter 1. The results include almost unbelievable pictures that are placed in the rawest scenarios of Colombia's society, going to the direction of black humor.



*Archive of El Chino. Escobar's mansion, Hacienda Napoles, is located in Puerto Triunfo, Antioquia. The property featured an airport, a go-kart track, a zoo, and this plane, which is a copy of the real one that Escobar used to transport his first 5,000-kilo load of cocaine into the US. Nowadays, it is a museum*



In a video interview held in 2017 for Vice Media (VICE, 2009), El Chino mentioned that one of his most important duties was to photograph the animals of Hacienda Nápoles. Exotic animals imported illegally such as ostriches, kangaroos, llamas, rhinos, giraffes and more. Under the years where violence was frightening the streets of Colombia, El Chino was photographing one side of Pablo, the friendly one. What makes the relation with Magic Realism in this example is that El Chino was photographing a parallel reality that was still present back in the days. It feels like, these animals, big, heavy and large animals, where “magically teleported” to Antioquia.



“An admirer of exotic birds, Pablo kept several ostriches at Hacienda Nápoles. Here a groundskeeper offers one a smoke.” All rights to El Chino.

*“A joke is a judgment which produces a comic contrast”* (Freud, 1905, p.6). And what is the comic contrast in this scenario? The irony that these pictures showcase the violence without even showing it in the picture. In these photographs, there is no threat, just people or elements that go on the scene and are understood within a context.

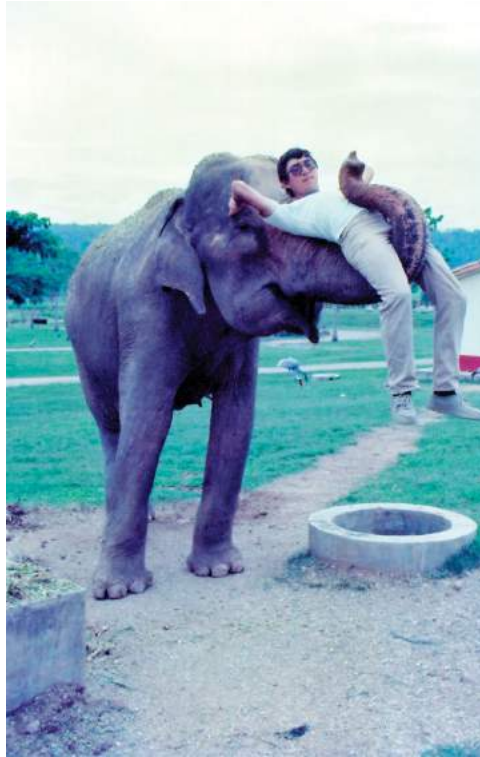
El Chino has not had any exhibitions of his work and this could be caused by the amount of high dissimilarity and irony that his work has. For Colombian society, it would mean to give more importance to a person that caused a lot of damages

and infame to the country. Nevertheless, the pictures taken by “El Chino” portrayed a story that no other person in Colombia could have ever done: Escobar was human.



Juan Pablo's birthday party. All rights to El Chino.

1989 was one of the peak years of the war between Pablo, the Cartel of Cali and the government. The picture above was taken on Juan Pablo's, his son, birthday party. A thoughtful Pablo, drowning in his own thoughts was not pretending to enjoy the celebration. In several media, El Chino mentioned this picture as his favorite, as he reflects in knowing the conditions of Medellin Cartel back on those days. Pablo's deep reflections may include violent episodes, like the bombing of the Department of homeland security with 500 kilos of gunpowder or the detonation of the airplane with 106 passengers on board.



Self portrait of El Chino riding one of Pablo's elephants imported illegally to Colombia

Although the pictures of El Chino prove that his slight humor might sanctify unconsciously the horrors of that period of time, his pictures had the ability to empathize with the viewers. They use the feeling of the viewer to discover the intimate story of the most famous *narco*, seen with cynicism and therefore, accepted.

The photographs are full of surreal elements in tragic reality. However, the pictures are humble to show what was going on, they did not need extraordinary compositions or over-aestheticize film developments. Most of the pictures are done with a "point and shoot" camera (VICE, 2009). What catches the attention of the viewer is the "Mise-en-scène" in an aggressive context and its hostility. The playful elements only show a humanization of the evil, a gentle compassion for humankind. On the contrary to other photographers, the pictures of El Chino does not show signs of violence or threats as many would think.

As El Chino gained popularity, he began photographing covers of local publications, mostly porn magazines. "El Cartel de Medellín" also had his own zine called: "Cuerpos: magazín erótico mensual para hombres y mujeres, exclusivamente adultos" (in English: "Bodies: a monthly erotic magazine for men and women, exclusively adults").

According to Fernando Salamanca's investigation "*La revista porno de los Escobar*" (Salamanca, 2020), Edgar Escobar, communications leader of the Medellín's Cartel was in charge of communication media of "Cuerpos". Fernando describes the magazine as a pocket-size adult entertainment publication and it costs, in 1980, one-tenth of the minimum salary in Colombia. He describes it as an experiment that became a referent of Colombian porn worldwide. El Chino was a staff photographer for the editorial. "His first work as a porn photographer was with some girls of his neighborhood like Marcela Barbosa and Paola Luna, models that later were published in various issues of "Cuerpos". People called El Chino "porn-narco-photographer"." (Salamanca, 2020)



"Erotic pictures of national models, a world of sex".

*Cuerpos Magazine. Year 1. Issue no. 2. All rights to Cuerpos team and photographers.*

The publication is one of the pioneers of adult content in the nation. It is widely connected with the idea of exploitation fiction, mentioned in the previous chapter. Even with more sophistication than his documentary photography, the concept is connected with El Chino's reality and desires. As Pablo, both were born and raised in humbles quarters of Medellín.

On this publishing house, there was also a gay magazine that El Chino had the chance to shoot named "Póker". Most of the cover issues of "Cuerpos" were trying to rely on European styles and standards on their covers but adapted into a cheap, street style Colombian photography.



Cuerpos magazine's covers.

*"Several of the Poker models (an openly gay magazine) were killed in vendettas in the eighties and when Los Pepes (chased by Pablo Escobar) was created. Some of Escobar's hired assassins with a terrible record were clients of the transvestite brothels in Leuven, Medellín, fell in love and took them away so as not to share them with anyone. In those years, many transvestites ended up carrying pistols and grenades in their portfolios, along with eyelashes and makeup, others more determined, became thugs under the orders of El Patrón" (Salamanca, 2020)*

To conclude, I question the necessity of reproducing these images. El Chino's pictures reflect a human being, enjoying life in a disordered reality that shows us the scorn of the society he was living in, his images don't showcase violence, death, and pornmisery. They are *fun*, because of the objects of the images that are not a true reflection of everyone but a few people involved. There is a paradox going on between the social group and the whole country. Another ethical issue in this story is the camouflage of reality. Meanwhile, most of the people were suffering because of one organization, there is a huge limbo of possibilities and the reach of his power not only in Colombia but in the world.

## CHAPTER 5.

### PLAYFUL JUDGEMENTS: *Interview with Paola Rojas.*

This chapter talks about the relationship between religion and cheap objects in art photography seen as a critical joke and based on the caricature. This chapter analyses an interview made with Paola Rojas, an artist from Colombia that talks about these topics on her artwork.

Paola won the photographic award from the National Museum of Colombia and her concept explores the construction and exploration of the body in self-portraits and other people. The interview, made in January 2020, is supported with writings from Kristine Stiles about humor and performances; Henri Bergson's essay on the meaning of the comic and Gombrich's "The use of images in society".



*Self Portrait (2018), all rights to Paola Rojas.*

Paola is the second child of a catholic devoted marriage. In her teenage years, she was not allowed to do anything that was a sin to the eyes of the Christian priest. The taboo that involves talking about gender issues and sexuality lead Paola to discover herself and her body through the years.

The process of reconciliation with her body also led her to explore what is around her nowadays. Her style can be defined as a critic to advertisement aesthetics. She is usually goofing off and making it look kitsch and fun. Her images look like a game to the audience where the artist is confronting the viewer with some extravagant, highly saturated images that for some cults and Religion can be considered offensive.

Kristine Stiles speaks in *Fluxus Performances* (2002, p.52) and humor about what is required to goof off. *"It (goofing off) requires developing a fine-tuned sense of what it means to pause long enough and distance oneself far enough from worldly objects and events to recognize their illusory dimension and thereby reinvest de world within wonder"*. In the eyes of Paola, simple objects can redefine an image. She usually plays with jocular, ironic elements applied to vernacular objects. *"The process of making this picture was not intentional. I like to collect. I went to the shop in the corner of my house, where they usually sell very cheap things and I bought them. After, I left my brain to do the connections"*. (Rojas, 2020)

The pictures have cheap imitations of the representation of Jesus Christ in popular European culture<sup>49</sup>. *"I have a fixation for goofy things, things that look cheap, low priced. (Rojas, 2020)"* She follows. *"I honestly don't know why people would buy those stickers but I'm pretty sure there's something respectful on it"*<sup>50</sup>.

In Paola's photographs, we see a critical appropriation of the European, romantic-style Catholic symbols that Colombians elevate them as something "holy" until that point that seems funny. It is when she sticks this very important, sanctified, blessed symbols and puts them in a very different place, like a vagina, where everything changes the meaning.

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<sup>49</sup> In the thesis we already mentioned the importance of catholic religion in Colombia. Besides of its necessity to resemble to European styles not only in religion but in art, as seen in the example of Rembrandt portraiture.

<sup>50</sup> Not only respectful but religious, symbolic. But this is a great example to see how religion and European has influenced Colombians to be attracted at them.



Her second obsession is the body. It usually comes with strong color palettes and satire. Paola speaks about this moment of her career (2018) as decisive. She began working in advertisement and taking pictures as a personal venting. *"While in the morning, I had to work for Coca-Cola and demonstrate all day that I was happy, at night when I had free spaces I could be me. I did what literally "came out of my pussy."*



Take your turn (2018). All rights to Paola Rojas

In *Laughter: An Essay on the meaning of the Comic*, Henri Bergson writes about the comic that, to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment. *"Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification."* (Bergson, 1900, p.8) *"Then I came up with the idea of making badly cut stickers with very childish colors and also that they look cheap. I wanted them to say "bitch" and I started talking about labels and how much it costs us to get rid of them."*<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> What is subjective should be put into a social context to be understood. See Bordieau in his essays on art and Edward Goyeneche in *Photography and Society*.



Untitled (2018). All rights to Paola Rojas

Paola's parody of the extreme catholic religion and advertisement is reproduced with the caricature and kitsch<sup>52</sup>. A real proof that the joke needs society to digest reality is that it needs general culture to be understood. Paola's artwork has an intrinsic level of politic statements in the images due to the extreme connections between politics, government, and religion in Latin American countries.

The artist explains in the interview that she was very influenced by the caricatures that she saw when she was young, back in the 1990's. There is an aesthetic "paw print" with colors and mannerist caricatures, like looney tunes - big face humanized animals with vibrant colors.

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<sup>52</sup> I want to add a question on this thought that, what if we see some of the pictorialist artworks of the previous centuries nowadays? Probably we will think it is kitsch because it does not resemble modern's visual codes of art. Culture evolves. Paola's work jumps the barrier of the kitsch because she works with an important statement between comic and caricature and make the image fun.



In Colombian culture, the kiss of a clown is oral sex done to a woman when she's menstruating. (2018) All rights to Paola Rojas.

The concepts of cheap, exaggeration, sex and politics are still present in her work, even in her memories. *"What did I see when I was a child? Exaggerated caricatures like Cow and Chicken, the behind of the newspaper, plagued with caricatures that I barely understood back in the days but I'm pretty sure they were critical... I was just attracted by their shapes."* (Rojas, 2020).

Arthur Koestler, writer, and philosopher states: *"Creative originality always implies unlearning and relearning, undoing and redoing. It involves breaking down petrified mental structures, disposing of matrices that have lost their usefulness, and recomposing others until they form new syntheses. In other words, it is a very complete dissociation and bisociation<sup>53</sup> operation in which various levels of the mental hierarchy participate "*, (Koestler, 1981, p.178).

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<sup>53</sup> According to Webster's Dictionary, bisociation is the "simultaneous mental association of an idea or object with two fields not ordinarily seen as related." An example may be the "just-in-time" or "series one" method.

The final implication of all this is that the creative person, or group, must be conceived essentially as provocateurs of disorder and conflict, but also with equal propriety as generators of balance and harmony. The creative process involves moments of disorder, conflict, and chaos; internal and external, but as ladders on the way to a state of things defined as better.

Creativity might be seen and as a cross-fertilization. Is it a combination of old ideas with what you're seeing today? The great human creations have emerged as a result of combining, relating and integrating ideas and facts that already exist, but previously disconnected. *"This act of cross-fertilization or fertilization within a single brain seems to constitute the essence of creativity and justifies the use of the term bisociation"* (López, 1995) <sup>54</sup>.

In this creative process, time does not go in a linear form. It goes circular, like in the literally magic realism. *"The creative life is not linear. It's not a straight line from point A to point B. It's more like a loop, or a spiral, in which you keep coming back to a new starting point after every project. No matter how successful you get, no matter what level of achievement you reach, you will never really "arrive" (Kleon, 2020, p.10).*

Paola also explains the environment where she made these pictures. *"I was in a context where I saw and grew up in a poor environment. I live in a "popular" neighborhood and I went to public school. My mom always tried to make me feel different than the other kids in class and now I consider it very ironic and fool because, at the very end of the day, I live here"* (Rojas, 2020).

The use of cheap and playful objects is combined with what Kuno Fischer calls

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<sup>54</sup> *The Act of Creation*, a book written by Arthur Koestler in 1964, is frequently cited, where an explanation of creativity is proposed, supported by the thesis that affirms the existence of a fundamental scheme or common pattern at the base of all creative activities, covering in particular scientific discovery, artistic originality and comic inspiration. However, it seems that Koestler had already raised it in 1949, in the book *Insight and Outlook*, a first version of his unified theory of creativity, including the concept of bisociative thought, which he will later take up in other texts.

playful judgments. *"Playful judgments looks at what Breton characterized in the anthology of black humour as the "lightning bolt" of the unsettlingly comic - the fact that humour can, paradoxically, be a way of coping with the most tragic of circumstances: there's nothing that intelligent humour cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void... "we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition" had similarly stressed that "to understand laughter we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one... it must have a social signification"* (Bergson, 1900, p. 25).

Paola adds in the interview that one of her hobbies is to go to auctions and one-dollar-shops to see what she finds. "First, I buy very cheaply, almost deformed, stickers but then I tried to make them by myself. It's actually funny because they're the same material I can find in the shop around the corner, an A4 paper and a printing of 0.1 euros (...) but the trick is to make it look sophisticated. It was this dialogue between saying: I'm not from this social environment in fact, I am" (Rojas, 2020).

The artistic connections between Paola's artwork and herself do not romanticize poverty. It is the outcome of a communication with her own environment. Paola's artwork initiates a discussion between replicated, distorted culture and her reality. Especially with the sophistication of the goofy and cheap. *"In my context, it seems all like a big joke. Meanwhile, I saw Pepa Pig's face distorted on a 1-dollar t-shirt with a caricature that doesn't have to do anything with her, I also saw people liking them and enjoying it. It is curious to think; don't they realize that this is funny? (...) I also began to find a pattern in what I was buying. I bought what would like my parents to have bought me when I was a child".*



Hit the teddy (2018). All rights to Paola Rojas. In her studio, or what she calls it "atelier", she usually makes her self-portraits.

Another important connection is the use of saturated colors and greasy skin tone, parodying the aesthetics of the 1990s. A hint can also be funny. However, art never took laugh seriously. She explains it also with the connections between food and sexuality, especially traditional food, the emotional connotation of a national dish.

Laughing connects and that is why it is consumable by people: it is sexual, funny, and it is identified to a region, in this case, Latino. There are symbols that identify you with that cheap thing that you once thought was nothing but you grew up with it. It is like a tropic vibration, temperature, color, food.

*"I chose to photograph the empanada that you eat everyday that seems so irrelevant. You have an element that is familiar in another structure of language that you would never imagined and you consider it yours because it is something Latin, such as the empanada, for example."* (Rojas, 2020)



*Empanada (2018). All rights to Paola Rojas.*

Paola does an appropriation with her work with objects she has around her but metaphors them into her daily life common situation. Then, she goes back to the starting point and evaluate her decisions. As Garcia Márquez, Paola uses a narration in cyclic time on her artwork, where she combines her present and shows that the order of events is not as relevant as the way in which they happened.

## CONCLUSIONS.

### A JOKE THAT WON'T MAKE YOU LAUGH



*J. Calderón. The Colombian Dream. A couple using oranges to perfume the environment.*

The main objective of this thesis was to explain the movement that uses humour as social venting and the characteristics of it in various dimensions of photography in Colombia including fashion, advertisement, documentary, and art.

The research proves that aesthetics and motivations are a social reflection of Colombia's cultural environment in which the photographer was born or evolved. It showcases the influence of pornmisery and exploitation fiction in the creators but as a critical statement. The use of vernacular, cheap objects and appropriation of their own reality is also proved between the ecosystem of the photographer and their artwork. It also shows the influence of European styles in the gestures, poses, illumination, and the catholic tradition representation.



Investigation displays the uses of playful elements that are related to cheap, religious and sometimes sexual objects that redefines the criticism against the romanticization of poverty. There is a relationship with magic realism in the way of representing a space that is real but also parallel to the photographer's reality happening in scenarios where marginality and poverty are present.

To conclude, this thesis compares the creative process of some artists with the conclusion that photographers are resourceful with the objects used to photograph and use elements that belong to their own idiosyncrasy like food and other everyday objects and activities, like knitting or reading newspapers. Another connection with magic realism is the use of items that represent the country and culture specially food and colors. There is a strong connection with caricature and playful elements as symbols and visual codes in the image that are used as an excuse to talk about other topics. The connection with the joke is very different as a thought in the beginning. This is a joke that will not make the viewer laugh but it is intrinsic with elements such as sarcasm, cynicism and dark humour. It is a joke that does not make anyone laugh, but think.

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