

Agency in the Object: the “Disposable” Children in Víctor Gaviria’s Films

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In this project I discuss the “disposable”—the word assigned by Medellín’s mainstream citizenry to the children of the streets—as they are presented in the films and testimonial of Colombian artist Víctor Gaviria. His work accounts for the lives of human beings living and dying in misery and oblivion on the streets of a heavily populated city and simultaneously unveils the failure of citizenry—heretofore—to witness, without alibi (to be derridian), the lives of the “disposable.”

In the encounters mediated by Gaviria’s work, the “disposable” children are no longer throw-aways. They are within, this creative space, a new political force, one not measured by the stagnant categories and teleological models of historical progress, maturity, or intellectual and economic development. In a world evermore segregated, where the mechanisms of domination become increasingly sophisticated and consolidated, Gaviria’s transgression of hegemonic values is a force which compels us to re-think and reflect on the elements of modern civilization.

The street is a path where multitudes of children are so relentlessly apparent, so hyper-exposed, that their humanity becomes invisible to the numbed citizen. Instead they perceive only monstrosity and detritus. In Gaviria’s films, the spectator encounters the faces, voices and behaviors of children excluded from vital and dignified possibilities of “being in the world.” It is an encounter that reverses the gaze and unveils the automatization of a social order that habituates indifference to the agony of these children and is complicit in their elimination.

Víctor Gaviria works with natural, non-professional actors from the streets, orphanages and slums of Medellín. These forgotten children act themselves in the films *Rodrigo D. No*

futuro (1990) and *La vendedora de rosas* (1998), and narrate the testimonial *El pelaíto que no duró nada* (1991).¹ Gaviria's style of direction allows the inclusion of his actors' own selves and imaginations; though they follow the dramaturgical direction of the filmmaker, the children perform as they would in their daily lives: with their own gestures, body movements, and their own socio-lect. The natural actors that participate in these films are part of an urban subculture within Medellín often referred to as the "desechable"(disposable) by "el ciudadano pleno" (the mainstream citizen). This term connotes the ephemeral and killable category of human beings who are born into communal fragmentation, socio-economic misery, and urban violence. They are destined to struggle in chaotic circumstances where death becomes the only way out. The "disposable" live short lives, knowing full well there is no room for them in the "legitimate" and "normalized" public spheres of production and exchange of cultural and material capital. Some of the juveniles are *pistolocos* (hit men paid by drug dealers), *traquetos* (drug mules), while most of them are also *sacoleros* (glue sniffers). They have their own socio-lect, *el parlache*, a language that can be defined as anti-language. A term created by the linguist Michael Alexander Halliday to describe a socio-lect that manipulates the grammar and vocabulary of the standard language.² Note for instance the significant and playful mutation in the syllabic addition of "sisas" for sí or "notis" for no, the syllabic subtraction of "ñero" for compañero, and the repetition of syllables of chupachupa for a dagger. It transforms established metaphors creating new connotations. The word "traído," in the standard Spanish of Medellín means "Christmas's gift," in *el parlache* it is transformed to suggest a victim—a mark—who they encounter by chance, rob and murder. In tracing similarly used words that also indicate cadaver, such as: *muñeco, quieto, quebrado, chulo, caído, cascado, frío, friquiado, estirado, y tieso*, we find they are all brutally resemanticized to create instances of abjection.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva distinguishes two inseparable modalities, the semiotic and the symbolic, within the signifying process that constitutes language. The semiotic is the realm of pre-Oedipal drives, primary processes that are presymbolic and which she understands in terms of aggressivity. They are the necessary elements for language acquisition.³ According to Kristeva, it is the modality that creates unrepressed language. The symbolic is the domain of the syntax, the law, the linguistic categories and “the social effect of the relation to the other” (29). Kristeva writes: “the distortion of words, the repetition of words [...] reveal that a semiotic network—the chora—has been established, one that simultaneously defies both verbal symbolization and the formation of a superego patterned after paternal law and sealed by language acquisition” (152). In *el parlache*, the equilibrium between the semiotic and the symbolic is asymmetric. Defiance, opposition to the normative language, and a strong presence of libidinal pulsions are major components. Indeed, the semiotic re-emerges with force.

The identifying vocabulary of *el parlache* renders the individual and collective aggression and destruction in the lives of the “disposable.” But it also registers their capacity to create new meaning while demoralizing the standard or dominant language. In their socio-linguistic study of *el parlache*, José Henao and Luz Stella Castañeda note that there are 73 words or expressions related to death, 27 words to designate fire arms; 11 for knives; and 158 related to drugs (82). The term for the sexually transmitted disease, “gonorrhoea,” is used by the street kids as a shifting signifier—a wild card—applied to anything or anybody. This linguistic praxis recreates the abject reality of the disposable. The death drive and libidinal pulsions provide the street kids with the aggressive energy necessary to express their anger, desperation, desolation, and marginal reality.

According to Halliday, anti-language develops out of anti-societies: peripheral, marginal or underground subcultures often rejected by the mainstream citizenry. *El parlache*, is the language of Fábber in *El peláito*, of Rodrigo and his friends in *Rodrigo D*, as well as Mónica and her roommates in *La vendedora*. These works mediate an encounter; the audience must look at the faces and listen to the voices of the children dubbed “human debris.” The street kids, in their radical alterity, occupy the center stage and repeat, through fiction, their own experience and geography. These non-citizens become visible as actors in a public sphere and present instances of their daily routines charged not only with violence, passion, and a desire to consume, but also with friendship and love. The spectator is forced to meet the identities of the Other; their forms of knowledge and the subcultures that inhabit the same, but not the same, nation-space.

This reversal of positions—with the “disposable” in a center, hegemonic space—provokes a visceral reaction among the citizenry. It is a provocation produced when the text confronts the spectator/reader with an imaginary more “real” than reality itself. These texts expose an, otherwise, ineffable imaginary that escapes the structure and the grammar of obedience, typically enforced by the socio-symbolic order and its traditional institutions—family, school, church, and state. The films and testimonial renders the imaginary’s most chaotic, archaic instincts and desires conspiring with the plurality of fragmented desires and the ephemeral, discontinuous flows of the capitalist market. In Gaviria’s texts, the street children, the “disposable”, embody that abject other, dominated by corporeal instincts and pulsions; that other whom it is necessary to reject in order to achieve becoming an “I” in the socio-symbolic order. Likewise they embody that “consumed consumer” or *consumizen*, taking to the extreme—in their own destruction and the destruction of their object—the satisfaction of their (infantile) desire, deferred and fetishized in the supreme merchandise.⁴ Gaviria films on location, his *mise en*

scenes are contextualized in a territory of social misery and economic lack, produced, largely, by the values and socio-economic neoliberal policies of late capitalism. Hence, this close proximity to human beings who embody the otherness of the modern state, its new disorders and the tragic and chaotic contradiction of the civilized order, produce panic and repulsion.

Colombian filmmaker and film critic, Julio Luzardo calls Gaviria's films social pornography. In his acid critique, Luzardo reduces the film to a morbid piece, both depressing and suffocating and refers to its themes as "cloaca" (the Latin word for sewer).⁵ According to this logic, the flexible living body of the "disposable" is not worthy of cinematographic representation. Luzardo fails to recognize the dis-identity (as opposed to self portrait) and abject otherness that confronts him with his own abjection.

The audience's provocation is indicative of the potential agency in these films. The encounter they mediate works as a trigger, exposing repressed awareness. These kids are more than simply abject, foreign and disgusting. Perhaps the audience also recognizes themselves in the Other: their own vulnerability to be lost and nameless—a repulsive and repressed part for the missing whole. The depth of this reaction communicates a profound fear and latent awareness of the citizenry's own potential abjection and the instability of their own identities.

This frontal close-up to the abject-subject can be thought of as obscene, and not, as Luzardo suggests, pornographic. The obscene occurs, as Hal Foster suggests, when the abject-object is too close to the viewer. That is to say, it is not distanced through regulated procedures with stylized scenes, aseptic simulations, or with "professional" actors taming and satisfying a controlled gaze characteristic of pornographic staging—as in a peep-show.⁶

The "disposable" are the children of displaced people, escapees from rural warfare

among guerrillas, militaries, paramilitaries and narco-guerrillas. They are also the children of farmers displaced by multinational take overs of their lands,⁷ and the absolute poverty caused, in great part, by government corruption and its inefficient neoliberal policies. These policies favor agricultural economies that privilege importation --Free Trade Treaties, NAFTA, TLC— and the hiper-technification of production resulting in the economic drowning-out of thousands of small farmers. In Medellín, the displaced survive in what are called “Los cinturones de miseria,” the borders of misery that surround the city. *Las comunas* are slums within Medellín, these overcrowded urban clusters, are not considered official settlements and, so, are not entitled to basic services. The displaced are forced to illegally take over water and electricity, resources now owned by private corporations. The displaced have no rights to claim. In Colombia citizenship is restricted to and by the forces of production. Unemployment, diseases (plagues, diarrhea), lack of basic public sanitation services (water, sewers) and deficiency of social services (education, church, health) are rampant in *Las comunas* and lead to ontological and existential disjunctives.

The community fragments, the family fabric breaks down, and the mother/child relationship is disrupted. The child grows up without a figure of authority – parents, teacher, priest— who imposes the law, the social prohibitions, the rules and the entrance into the symbolic-social realm, indeed the grammar of obedience.

Following Kristeva’s argument, in order to enter the social sphere, the child needs to distance, separate and more or less repress the drives of the semiotic. The father figure marks the rupture in what she calls the “thetic phase,” the acquisition of language and the formation of an autonomous self. Kristeva insists that abjection is rooted in the struggle that every human being carries on with the mother and, in order to become autonomous, it is necessary that the child breaks the instinctual connection to the mother and “becomes something other” (118).⁸ Without

an authority that imposes the “symbolic law” and without stable maternal care, the infant’s personality is left to develop on the basis of his/her aggressive drives and on reactions to environmental influences: the absence of socially acceptable forms of work and the systems of socialization and discipline that they require facilitate the child’s identification with the hit-man, the drug dealer, and the gang member.

Las comunas, are the slums where children like Rodrigo and Mónica wander among the non-existent citizens. *Rodrigo D* is a production filmed on the rutted dirt paths and in the hovels of Las comunas. 17-year-old, Rodrigo, unlike his gang member friends, walks alone and without direction. His melancholic mood is rooted in the loss of his mother and in his frustrated attempts to make music— his deepest desire. Rodrigo’s friend, el Pelao, wanders the city on a stolen motorcycle with no plates, looking for victims to rob and kill. In the last sequence of *Rodrigo D*, we follow Rodrigo to the top floor of a skyscraper, while in an alternating shot, we see el Pelao’s escape from his executioners. The final scenes capture Rodrigo’s suicide and el Pelao’s murder.

Mónica, the protagonist of *La vendedora*, is a 13-year-old orphan who spends her nights wandering the city, selling roses to lovers or stealing whatever she can put her hands on. She needs money to buy the only “drug” she can afford: glue, a chemical that burns her brains. And there is el Zarco, a 17-year-old boy whose violent cruelty and desire to consume has no boundaries. At night in the ruins of what used to be her grandmother’s house, Mónica is killed by a bullet intended for el Zarco. At the moment of her death, Mónica’s only possession is a bottle of *sacol* (or rubber glue). Like an umbilical cord, glue unites her to her mother in moments of hallucination and protects her against the horrors of hunger. Monica attempts to reunite with her mother through a destructive addiction that finally renders her an abject body. Immediately after, el Zarco is murdered by members of his own gang.

The dramatic performance of these films parallels reality. Except for Ramiro Meneses who plays Rodrigo and who eventually becomes a musician and filmmaker, all the other actors are in Medellín's jails or dead. Lydia Tabares who plays Mónica is now accused of homicide. Jayson Gallego (el Pelao) and Giovanni Quiroz (el Zarco) were gunned down in gang-related executions a few years after the films were released. Their own lives give life to these character renderings, blurring the line between fiction and reality. Gang war in *Las comunas* is pervasive, the kid-adults turn into killers are condemned by the law of *Talion* to seek retribution. Adolescents kill each other everyday or are eventually killed by death squads, usually comprised of secret State police, in what is named "limpieza social" (social cleansing). Their bodies are piled in morgue pavilions under the title of N.N: "No Nombre" (no name, no identity).

Marking the disposable as killable resonates with Giorgio Agamben's ideas of State of Exception. Agamben speaks of: "...the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of the political adversaries but entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system" (2). The suspension of the law to eliminate the "disposable" is a practice exercised by the death squads in the name of "security"⁹

The disposable's state of abjection is perceived as a danger, both physical and moral – a presence that must be expelled or eliminated from the social body. In *Powers Of Horror*, Kristeva suggests that it is possible to establish a relationship between a body that releases fluids, considered disgusting in western culture (e.g., vomit, sweat and feces) and society as a symbolic order that expels that which destabilizes, considering it filthy and, therefore, unworthy of inclusion. Kristeva notes: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, and rules. The in-

between, the ambiguous,... the criminal [...]" (4). The "disposable" youth are in a state of permanent transition and ambiguity. They are outside the limits of what civilization considers social beings: their own bodies are neither infant nor adult; their dislocated communities give way to other unsanctioned forms of kinship, or simply hordes; their transgression of norms are driven, not by ideology but, by their strong desire to consume the goods that are denied; and in their psychosis, melancholia and hallucinations they are neither outside nor inside the mother's womb. Here, there is a clear association between abjection and liminality. The anthropologist Victor Turner defines liminality as something frequently associated with death "[...], to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness [...]" (95).¹⁰ The corpse "...the utmost of abjection" (Kristeva, 4) is the final state of Gaviria's protagonists. Yet, even in life, these adolescents are, as Gaviria says, "afuera del mundo"— outside or in-between the limits of civilized order; an order that recognizes itself by eliminating its constitutive Other.¹¹

Encountering the face of the "disposable", on a close frame, gives full form to beings which, from a distant and askant view, seem monstrous. Nonetheless, Gaviria does not reduce them to an explanation or a translation. The children present themselves as thinking and imaginative subjects that talk, reflect and imagine from other orders (the semiotic, the minor, the minority and the *consumizen*), on their own lives and reality. Likewise, when encountering this other city, *Las comunas*, one's gaze sets on the dark steep alleys and the houses hanging over the edges of eroded slopes, that disappear, along with the people, into the mud during the rainy seasons. The characters and the spaces are confusing and unforeseeable and render the chaos of living in circumstances of extreme poverty and violence.

These detritos-beings, in their dislocated and marginal geographies, occur in a public space of power –the mass communication of film and testimonials. Beyond their central appearance as

actors they participate in the actual creative production: script writing and casting, in what Gaviria calls “collective enunciation.”¹² This is a collective participation of a momentarily decriminalized youth, one which is self-conscious and capable of recreating, imagining and reflecting their realities through fiction. It is an enunciation which transforms the “disposable” youth into agents creating an urban memory, and simultaneously crumbling the certainties, values and sensibilities instituted by the official cultures and representations.

The dramaturgic work Gaviria does with the children of the streets opens new horizons, offering an aesthetic and ethical space capable of collecting and transforming the abjection of this destructive chaos into the signifying process of a text. In these performative moments the children render obscure instances, both ineffable and intolerable. But, simultaneously, a “thetic separation” from that “semiotic which destroys” takes place: by participating in a creative project, the “disposable” become responsible subjects actively engaged in constructing an urban memory. These youth attend to the word of a figure who earns respect before their eyes (Gaviria in his role of director/friend, and, inevitably, a father) and turn it into dramaturgy before the camera. To take a step outside their daily lives and to re-create in front of a camera their “*petite recite*” is to take a step beyond their own being, in a performative action that extends their own potentialities, and opens lines of transformation through which they might realize other realms, other ontological possibilities.

This performance captures different codes coming from their archaic instincts, feelings, thoughts and multiple languages, including Gaviria’s own language as a director. In this way, the “disposable” enters a vital symbolic sphere (that of expression through art: re-presentation) without having to repress the force of the semiotic. Through performance the “disposable” child becomes, a “subject-in-process,” a subject who, according to Kristeva, oscillates between these

two registers —the semiotic and the symbolic.

These films and testimonial include what the state and its institutions of vigilance and control work to erase through social cleansing and displacement, in their quest to create the illusion of a modern society. Gaviria's work provides a port-hole, allowing us to witness the actors and characters omnipresent in his work: infants not only because of their actual age but also because they do not speak like everyone else speaks, they do not imagine as everyone else imagines, and they do not think as the modern world thinks. By thinking anew and from other orders they provoke us to think again.

Notes

¹ The title of *Rodrigo D.* is an homage to the Neorealism of Vittorio De Sica's and Cesare Zavattini's *Umberto D.*, 1952. And *La vendedora de rosas* is a resemantization of Hans Christian Andersen's *The little Match seller*.

² In *Lenguaje como semiótica social*.

³ Kristeva's semiotic or *chora*— from Plato's *Timaeus*— is also the maternal space that is nourishing and unnamable.

⁴ The word *consumizen* is a neologism that I composed with the words consumer and citizen. It comes after Grant Farred's own neologism, *the politizen*. According to Farred the *politizen* “. . . is the subject whose rights can be suspended or worse—in a moment of crisis, precisely because *the politizen* is understood to have produced the crisis and so has effectively disenfranchised itself. For *the politizen*, therefore, citizenship is never guaranteed, citizenship is never an absolute right but contingent upon the condition of the political. . . *the politizen* reveals the limitation of the political, the ways in which the political can, in the event make *the politizen* other to the nation, alienable to itself as ‘citizen’ . . .” “The politizen” a lecture in The Fourth Annual Conference on Citizenship Studies, Race and Citizenship, Wayne State University (Mar 3, 2007) .

⁵ In his article called “¿Porno miseria?”

⁶ In his book *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the end of the Century*.

⁷ In “Beyond the Third World: Imperial Globality, Global Colony and Anti-Globalization Social Movements,” Arturo Escobar writes: “displacement has reached staggering levels, with several hundred thousand people displaced from this region alone [Pacific coast] In the southernmost areas this displacement has been caused in large parte by para-militares paid by

rich African oil palm growers, intent on expanding their holdings and increasing their production for world markets. This is being done in the name of the development with the resources provided by Plan Colombia” (9). This Plan is a multibillion dollar campaign promoted (Plan Patriota) by the reelected Colombian president Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2006, 2006-2010) with money from the USA. The purpose is to militarize the Andean zone in order to control the drug traffic and the guerrilla groups. During 2000 and 2002, 1.3 billion dollars were allocated for the Colombian army, escalating the war in rural areas.

⁸“Feminism and Psychoanalysis” in *Julia Kristeva Interviews*.

⁹I can mention two films that document this State of Exemption in which death squads (police) massacre the “disposable.” The powerful film *Ônibus174* (Brazil, 2002) of José Padilha is noteworthy. The filmmaker explores a crime committed by one survivor of the Rio de Janeiro’s massacre of la Candelaria. In this church seven children were exterminated in July 1993. And *La Sierra* (2005) of Scott Dalton y Margarita Martínez, presents the every day war in a neighborhood in Medellín. Some images show the military and the Nacional Police entering the Sierra as if they were in a combat zone, fully armed and in with their guns ready to shoot.

¹⁰In *The Ritual Process: Structure an Anti-structure*, Victor Turner takes the concept of liminality or liminal personae (“threshold people) from Arnold Van Gennep’s “liminal phase” of *rites de passage*.

¹¹In the epilogue of his testimonial *El pelaíto que no duró nada*, Gavirias writes about el Pelao (the character of *Rodrigo D.*). “[...] porque estaba , como todos estos muchachos, afuera del mundo. Era un N.N. en vida, un hombre invisible y vivo.”

¹²In an interview with Jorge Ruffinelli, Gaviria states: “En ese sentido, es una enunciación colectiva. La película es muchas cosas que le han ocurrido a muchísimas personas, tanto los hechos como las frases, las expresiones” (Ruffinelli 91).

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