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Slow onset: a brief consideration of Guillermo Moncayo's *Echo Chamber*

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On November 13, 1985, the Nevado del Ruiz volcano erupted in Colombia's Andean region. Less than three hours later, lahars caused the deaths of more than 20,000 people in Armero, a town with a population of fewer than 30,000, and killed a few thousand more in nearby areas. Movements within the volcano's magma chamber and fumarolic activity had been detected during the previous year; yet none of the numerous scientific and governmental activities undertaken throughout 1985 managed to mitigate what was called the "Armero tragedy." In the aftermath of the disaster, the Colombian Geological Survey recognized that mapping, assessing, and monitoring volcanic activity in the country was insufficient. Addressing "the gap between 'producers' and 'receivers' of knowledge" has become an urgent priority (Calvache Velasco 2021, p. 597).

One prominent policy change aimed to remove this gap through the deployment of mass media, and as a result, television and radio announcements became prevalent during periods of extreme climate and environmental instability. Exposed to such alerts during his youth, Colombian filmmaker and artist Guillermo Moncayo shared the view of his fellow *bogotanos,* who saw them as inadequate means of disaster prevention.[1] Furthermore, the alerts served as reminders of Bogotá's dominance over its underdeveloped rural peripheries - areas typically relegated to a supporting role in the national discourse and frequently sensationalized as sites of violence and catastrophe. Moncayo would later create his own version of these advisory broadcasts in his 19-minute short film, titled *Echo Chamber* (2014).

Moncayo began filming *Echo Chamber* on Colombia's western coast, in Buenaventura, and subsequently traveled north through the Department of Antioquia, ultimately reaching the end in Puerto Berrío, a riverport city in the country's interior. His film opens with images in which the camera remains immobile: close-ups and long shots of foliage and vegetation under rainy and foggy conditions, a young Afro-Colombian male gazing out a window, and animals such as chickens and cattle. Soon, this imagery is accompanied by the amplified sound of an alert providing cryptic technical data said to be gathered by the country's Center for Oceanographic and Hydrographic Research. Additional alerts are heard as incomplete fragments, referencing cyclones and hurricanes, far-off weather stations and satellites, climatological institutes and government entities. By the film's third minute, a railroad track amidst abundant greenery appears, filmed from the front of a moving mode of transport that is seen only partially. The first half of the film alternates between static and mobile views, showing sites and structures that seem to have fallen into disuse by humans, including empty buildings outside a mine and a hollowed-out bus. In one especially striking location, the encroaching natural environment has begun to penetrate the collapsing remnants of a building, as a sheep and a cow are shown inside its crumbling walls. Meanwhile, the

alerts begin to offer warnings, instructing residents to "avoid using elevators" and "secure any items likely to be swept away by strong air currents."

Fig. 1: Still from *Echo Chamber*

Through the construction of this audiovisual juxtaposition—where we observe outposts and landscapes marked by absence and decay while hearing official exhortations primarily directed at city dwellers - Moncayo produces a commentary on the absurdity of Colombia's efforts to convert its population into "receivers" of climatological knowledge. Subsequent alerts become increasingly arbitrary: listeners are instructed to take heed of evacuation notices, but they are also advised to return to their home safely, "keep[ing] away from any buildings or walls likely to collapse." They are told to "pay no attention to rumors," "avoid practising sports or leisure activities in high-risk areas," "bury or incinerate any dead animals as soon as possible," and "stay away from any objects that naturally attract lightning," including "golf clubs, machines, computers, fishing rods, neon signs, pipelines, or railways." The announcements in the film include excerpts from actual past alerts that Moncayo discovered through his research, interwoven with even more incongruous directives created by the filmmaker. Their patchwork, random quality reflects the authorities' and experts' assumption that it is feasible to address—and thereby interpellate - one collective body, a Colombian *pueblo* identifiable across diverse populations and terrains.

Echo Chamber thematizes the relationship between land and people, which many historians consider fundamental to understanding the country. This dynamic has been influenced by a "geography that separated Colombians by high mountain ranges, deep valleys, and dense jungles" (LaRosa and Mejía, 2012, p. 170). Moreover, as outlined in a recent historical account, during the early post-colonial period, the Colombian government endeavored to create a "common space," one that "became national as a result of the reduction of distances through the construction of multiple systems of transportation, however disarticulated," including railways (LaRosa and Mejía, 2012, p. 170). This integrative initiative also facilitated "the implementation of efficient communication technologies and the interregional diffusion of ideas and news to create a more well-informed

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public with a shared public opinion" (LaRosa and Mejía, 2012, p. 170). In its joining of rural geography, remote settlements, rail transport, and informational broadcasts, Moncayo's film looks back at two pivotal moments in the country's history: the early fabrication of a national identity and the more recent responses to perceived disasters and catastrophes, which exposed the fault lines in that collective construct for some Colombians.

Another key feature of *Echo Chamber* contrasts with the top-down perspective communicated in its audio announcements, and it involves the railroad tracks, which have been neglected for many decades. Again, Moncayo's youthful experiences are relevant to this aspect of the film. During his early process of conceptualizing the project, the filmmaker recalled his journeys on *El Expreso del Sol*, a train that operated until 1992. Having traveled along that route between Bogotá and the northern port city of Santa Marta, Moncayo initially envisioned a film that would follow a single continuous rail trip, using the track in order to create the type of mobile-camera shot known as a *traveling* (the English term is used in Spanish). When traveling shots present viewers with smooth, unimpeded movement, produced by a camera on a mode of transport running parallel to the ground, they can make it seem as if the depiction and traversal of space and place are subject to a high degree of machine-facilitated control. However, *Echo Chamber* is not a film that seems primarily designed to convey a sense of mastery over the landscape; rather, it offers a slow passage through areas of Colombia where multiple social, political, and natural factors render precariousness and uncertainty an integral feature of daily life.

Fig. 2: Still from *Echo Chamber*

At the same time, Moncayo offers more than a critique, as he draws from a contemporary use of the railways in order to highlight local resourcefulness and ingenuity. Midway through the film, the source of this continuous movement is revealed in a long shot to be an artisanal form of rail transport known variously as a *motorrodillo*, *brujita*, or *moto mesa*, depending on its region of use. Operated in the film by young men from the area, each of the two *motorrodillos* featured in *Echo*

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Chamber has a platform resembling a handcar, with benches for passengers and a motorcycle fixed to one end. The motorbike's rear wheel rides along one rail, propelling the movement of various ball bearings positioned beneath and around the platform. Contrasting with perceptions of the countryside as underdeveloped and difficult to navigate, the *motorrodillo* represents an invention that is born from and counteracts a dual situation of neglect: that of Colombia's railways and the local residents whose basic transportation needs have not been met.

Situated on the vehicle's platform is the filmmaker's own makeshift structure, a vertical frame that holds five horn loudspeakers, typically seen in public address systems. Notably, when Moncayo makes the first *motorrodillo* fully visible to the viewer, it is broadcasting not an official alert but rather "Hola Soledad" (Hello Solitude or Hello Loneliness), a Cuban bolero well-known among earlier generations of Colombians. As Rolando Laserie sings about encountering loneliness once again, greeting it with a sense of familiarity as if it were the lover he had lost, the camera glides past small villages devoid of people, showing only the colorful facades of the small buildings lining the tracks. Added to the film's dry humor, then, is an overlay of melancholy, open to interpretation but also suggestively linked to images of deprivation and loss, of imperiled communities clustered around the remnants of industry.

In conceptualizing his film, Moncayo was aware of two interrelated problems of representation: the persistence of a popular perception of peripheral regions as primitive and the risk of generating *pornomiseria* (depictions of Latin America's underclass that cater to a perverse desire to see abjection and decadence, often while maintaining a moralistic viewpoint).[2] Part of his artistic strategy entails bypassing overtly didactic, informative, and testimonial modes. Even if *Echo Chamber* occasionally feels like a reverie, however, it is not a fantastical fiction. The film does provide audiovisual access to specific places and practices, as an observational documentary might, and yet it also draws from and alludes to Colombian history in an elliptical, ambiguous, and ironic manner. Put another way, the filmmaker has chosen a common approach within experimental documentary and artists' filmmaking, wherein a particular set of representational problems and risks - specifically related to the possibility of generating reductive or stereotypical portrayals - is countered by adopting a more flexible model of referentiality, one that introduces its own set of possible pitfalls and aporias. Without turning away from the audiovisual documentation of the found world, Moncayo discomposes nonfiction by incorporating fictional elements, ludically evokes actual events and collective imaginaries, and aims to make strange what is often easily categorized within normative frameworks. More open-ended and less explicit, this mode offers no guaranteed safeguard against, for example, the aestheticization of poverty; but for filmmakers like Moncayo, its potential drawbacks are outweighed by its generative, creative promise. At stake is the opportunity for a renewal, a liberation from our habitual, fixed ways of perceiving any given subject matter - and, more broadly, a rethinking and reworking of our relationship to mediated reality.

The film's blend of melancholy and irony acquires a deeper significance once we return to its theme of climate-related catastrophe. One effect of the audio track's fragmented litany of reports and directives is that it gives the impression that certain regions are repeatedly threatened by natural disasters. This is rendered more complex, however, by the centrality of the railway system in the film, which serves as a prominent symbol of capitalist exploitation and governmental neglect in Colombia, and by Moncayo's satirical rendition of those announcements, which implies that the authorities possess a limited grasp of the region. Furthermore, the visual motif of the ruin points to a longer history of decline, suggesting that devastation and destruction can unfold gradually and unspectacularly. Thus, the film's irony and melancholy are, in part, a response to a broad-based misapprehension of calamity: national attention is frequently directed toward ostensibly natural

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disasters, while the more persistent and protracted catastrophic conditions of life in regions that are perceived to be "closer to nature" are perpetually overlooked.

Fig. 3: Still from *Echo Chamber*

A final set of remarks, highlighting a point of intersection between two very different observers of the Colombian Andes, Moncayo, and a European academic specializing in slowly manifesting disasters. Through his research on the Colombian Andes, scholar Reidar Staupe-Delgado has emphasized the advantages of assuming an "anti-deterministic stance," which posits that "hazards do not produce disasters in and of themselves—vulnerability does" (Staupe-Delgado, 2022, p. 6). While natural hazards can reveal that certain populations are more exposed to risk than others, these groups may already have been living through the politically induced phenomena termed "slow onset disasters." As Staupe-Delgado notes, "life in anticipation of slow disaster is characterised simultaneously by continuity—in the sense that daily life still has to be lived, but also by a melancholic sentiment of impending displacement and its resulting uncertainty" (Staupe-Delgado, 2022, p. 13).

The *motorrodillo* in *Echo Chamber* can perhaps be interpreted as the symbol of that need to preserve continuity by carrying on with a day-to-day existence. Also, the song "Hola Soledad" weds the melancholic sentiment with an experience of loss that feels cyclical, ever-returning, and overly familiar. However, if we look beyond profilmic imagery and song lyrics, an attempt to connote the experience of "life in anticipation of slow disaster" might be found elsewhere - in the traveling shot itself. Always following a railroad track, Moncayo's *traveling* traces a line through sites and spaces only gradually, and in doing so, it makes temporal distension and sustained anticipation central to the experience of the film. Considered in relation to this, the title takes on a special relevance, for an echo chamber is an enclosed space whose acoustic design allows sounds to reverberate - that is to say, to take up more time. A reverberation is, according to one standard definition, the "prolongation of a sound...a continuing effect; a repercussion" (Stevenson, 2010).

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All the same, the film's final minutes lack any audio from the loudspeakers. The scene is nocturnal. Bright lights attached to the *motorrodillo* allow us to very briefly glimpse the Afro-Colombian residents of the region in their homes. Their presence is almost spectral, but they can nonetheless be observed in the ordinary domestic scenes of a small community. The *traveling* does not cease, passing yet more green vegetation as the end credits appear on screen. With the camera recording continuously, the *motorrodillo* rolls on slowly. We are not given to see its final destination.

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[1] My references to various biographical and production-related details are drawn from a February 2025 conversation with Moncayo, whom I thank for his availability.

[2] Moncayo has referred to *pornomiseria* directly in our conversations about his film. The term is associated with the Colombian filmmakers Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, who published their "Manifiesto de la pornomiseria" in 1978. For an introduction, see Faguet (2009).

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