COLOMBIA ENCHANTED IN *MEMORIA* AND *ENCANTO*

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In 2021, Colombia played backdrop to two decidedly different films about the enchanting power of its land.

I know what you're thinking: Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Walt Disney Animation Studios truly do not belong in the same sentence. The Thai auteur known for his sensory meditations on memory and desire hardly inhabits the same cinematic universe as the Mouse House that's given the world singing crabs and dancing beasts. Yet with the release of *Memoria* (Weerasethakul, 2021) and *Encanto* (Jared Bush and Byron Howard, 2021), I haven't been able to shake the feeling that these two foreign productions that take my home country as their richly textured backdrop serve as unlikely twins of one another. After all, both are fascinated with the immanent mysticism and the haunting specter of long-buried memories that run through Colombia's landscapes. Both films include moments when a community gathers together around the power of song, feature characters who have the skill to key into what's happening far from their immediate surroundings, and tell stories about a people whose mysterious spell keeps outsiders at bay.

To be frank, though, I am less interested in the arguably hazy thematic parallels that could be charted between a patient, quiet study in mysterious mythmaking and a loud, colorful musical extravaganza about intergenerational family trauma. No, what actually draws me to *Memoria* and *Encanto* as complementary (albeit hilariously mismatched) Colombian projects is the ways in which they approach and capture their chosen locale.

A personal exegesis: I became a cinephile in Colombia. But I did not grow up with Colombian cinema. Local multiplexes during my teenage years in Bogotá were flooded with Hollywood movies and only a smattering of European (mostly French and Spanish) fare. I was probably better versed in the cinema of François Ozon and Pedro Almodóvar (and Steven Spielberg and James Cameron) than in the arguably more limited filmography of Sergio Cabrera, Victor Gaviria, and Jorge Alí Triana. For years, I cited *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Francesco Rosi, 1987), which we watched in my Spanish lit class in the late 1990s, as the first homegrown production I'd ever seen. Given its setting in a small town near the Magdalena River and its pedigree as an adaptation of Gabriel García Márquez's slim novella of the same name, the teenage me assumed it was local. Now, its Italian director and European cast (which included Rupert Everett, Irene Papas, and Anthony Delon, among others) clearly position my experience of seeing the Cannes Film Festival opener as the first time that I saw Colombia through the cinematic eyes of a foreigner.

In the intervening decades, the country has played the requisite role of exotic locale to films as disparate as *Superman III* (Richard Lester, 1983), *Romancing the Stone* (Robert Zemeckis, 1984), *Collateral Damage* (Andrew Davis, 2002), and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (Doug Liman, 2005). Oftentimes standing in as an unblemished, hazardous jungle rife with armed men, Colombia has long been depicted as a region of and for danger. Even *Proof of Life* (Taylor Hackford, 2000), which dreamed up the fictional country of Tecala as its setting, couldn't hide where this action drama was supposed to be taking place, since the *Vanity Fair* article on which the film is based was squarely focused on kidnappings in Colombia.

Whenever I did encounter local productions of the sort that played in storied film festivals around the world, what I encountered was a gritty realism that was even harder to watch. *La vendedora de rosas* (*The Rose Seller*, Víctor Gaviria, 1998), for instance, which played Cannes and became Colombia's submission to the Academy Awards Foreign Language (now International) Film category, was a dour affair. Populated with nonprofessional actors from the streets, the critically acclaimed project captured a bleak portrait of urban poverty. Even as I watched Gaviria's film in the classroom, such encounters with Colombian cinema

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Jessica (Tilda Swinton) and Hernán (Elkin Díaz) surrounded by the lush Colombian landscape in *Memoria*.

never inspired me to look further into what was then a budding local industry (soon to be bolstered by new laws that incentivized up-and-coming filmmakers).

The snapshots of my country that came to dominate the most high-profile projects coming out of Colombia at the turn of the last century felt more like front-page photographs than stylized portraits of a society in, alternately, crisis, transition, and upheaval. Such naturalism, which aimed to capture a reality that many (like me) would rather not have faced, either on-screen or in real life, felt journalistic precisely because they privileged stories of drug cartels and *sicarios*, of street urchins and guerrilla fighters. They felt like obvious descendants of what filmmakers Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo had coined as "*pornomiseria*" in the 1970s. Violence, and the misery it begat, were the ever-present protagonists of these stories.

It's taken a few decades—and a few generations of bold new filmmakers—to bring to the forefront more-varied visions of Colombia. Most recently there have been such productions as *Contracorriente* (*Undertow*, Javier Fuentes-León, 2009), *La sirga* (*The Towrope*, William Vega, 2012), *El abrazo de la serpiente* (*Embrace of the Serpent*, Ciro Guerra, 2015), *La tierra y la sombra* (*Land and Shade*, César Augusto Acevedo, 2015), *Pájaros de verano* (*Birds of Passage*, Ciro Guerra and Cristina Gallego, 2018), and *Monos* (Alejandro Landes, 2019). These are the kinds of cinema that feel more closely aligned with the image of the country that first ignited the imagination of writers and thinkers around the world. In accepting his 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, Gabriel "Gabo" García Márquez diagnosed what he termed the region's "solitude" as indicative of the way that Latin American people made sense of their often wondrous (if tragic and violent) world: "I dare to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters." And he offered this, in his Nobel lecture:

> A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.[1]

It is with Gabo's ideas in mind that I went in to watch *Memoria* and *Encanto* within weeks of one another. For the realities therein presented are very much "full of sorrow and beauty," tinged with, in one case an alienating, and in the other a warmhearted, sense of nostalgia.

In Weerasethakul's first production shot outside his native Thailand, Jessica (Tilda Swinton) is awoken by a loud bang while asleep in a room in the bustling urban sprawl that is Bogotá. Only, as she later explains to a sound engineer, the sound she heard (or felt, maybe?) wasn't really a bang. It was like "a giant ball of concrete that fell onto a metal bottom surrounded by seawater … like a rumble from the core of the earth," she explains. What first appears to be a physical affliction turns out to be a metaphysical one, a symptom (an ailment, really) that goes beyond Jessica's own sensory awareness. Throughout *Memoria*, Weerasethakul plunges the audience deeper and deeper into what's ostensibly a haunted and haunting story, with Jessica's body, as well as Colombia's own land, plagued and enchanted by long-forgotten tales as well as emotional reverbs that continue to rumble over time.

There's a mystical immanence to the Colombian environment that Weerasethakul is portraying. Jessica meets a man who may or may not have really been there; her sister's husband worries about how a possible spell in the heart of the Amazon rain forest may be making his wife sick; a man disconnected from the world and living in a cloistered rural oasis of sorts can key into the lives of those long gone, tapping into the memories they've left behind in discarded and forgotten objects. Throughout *Memoria* there's the sense of a kind of magic all around, if only one knew how to tap into it. Jessica is rightfully called an "antenna" late in the film for her ability to so channel these spellbinding offerings.

As with Gabo's novels, *Memoria* taps into a magical realism wherein ordinary moments hinge on extraordinary circumstances—and vice versa—without losing sight of the groundedness of its story. As the Thai filmmaker puts it, there are clear parallels to be drawn between Colombia and Thailand. "I think we have a way of belief and conviction," he's noted. "We share the common belief in ghosts, for example. And there are some things that we keep inside, I think, because both countries are not that stable politically. We have some violence and conflict going. So, that's something, that unspoken thing, that I also tried to translate."[2]

Admitting he'd first become enamored with Colombia while visiting the Cartagena Film Festival (yet another screened version of the country that looks as much out as it does in), Weerasethakul found refuge in approaching Colombia as an outsider. This is why Jessica becomes the

Jessica (Tilda Swinton) presented visually as an alienated outsider in Colombia.

guide; she's not wholly foreign (even with Tilda's often luminous-looking pale complexion, her darkened hair and unassuming clothes allow her to blend in quite easily in the many street-set shots) but also not really at home. (She's supposedly fluent in Spanish, yet this doesn't keep her from continually missing or mishearing key pieces of information that disorient her as much as the audience.)

Going for this kind of inside/outside approach is arguably what makes *Memoria* such an alluring provocation: the country here is neither a mere painted backdrop nor a highly textured portrait. Instead, Colombia emerges as a character unto itself, one that demands to be understood not (solely) through its history but through its more elusive sensibility, which, as Jessica finds, can bend of its own accord. This is arguably why Weerasethakul pushes Jessica *into* the country, leaving the urbanity of Bogotá behind as she travels to a rural area where an archeological dig and a chance encounter with someone whom she may have met already push her to ponder the vastness of geological time, letting herself be immersed in other people's memories. The land is not just its people, and it's not just its objects. But it is through them that history is chronicled, archived, and remembered. *Memoria* imagines a kind of closeness that comes from distance.

Memoria hopes to invite its viewer into an alienating if wholly engrossing relationship with Colombia, mining its many contradictions (even those not easily understood by locals or foreigners, arguably reminding all viewers that they would do well to embrace the unfamiliar in the world). But *Encanto* aches to create a kinship with Colombia instead. Set in an unspecified late-twentieth-century rural area of Colombia, the animated musical (written by Bush with Charise Castro Smith) brims with color and energy.

Where *Memoria* opens with an eerie silence broken by a disturbing rumble, the Disney flick opens with a tender bit of family lore before careening into an increasingly frenetic opening number where audiences are introduced to the magical Madrigal family, all of whom (barring our protagonist, Mirabel, voiced by Stephanie Beatriz) have been blessed with a special gift. Mirabel's mom can heal anything with her cooking, her sister has superhuman strength, her cousin has supersonic hearing—and her estranged cousin Bruno banished himself from the household after his prophetic visions spelled doom for the entire family. Living in a cloistered town that's protected by a mysterious spell born out of the death of the Madrigal patriarch (at the hand of violent men on horseback), the characters at the heart of *Encanto* are very clearly meant to encapsulate all of Colombia. Not unlike Gabo's own Buendías in his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Madrigals are leaders in their community whose intergenerational trauma dictates their fates.

The magical Madrigal family in front of their enchanted "Casita," in *Encanto*.

The streets of Bogotá glimpsed in *Memoria*, many within steady-framed shots that turn audiences into voyeurs of those who cross the street alongside Jessica, are never meant to stand in for a larger whole. There's a rooted if indifferent specificity to them that points not outward but inward. In contrast, *Encanto* all but demands that you relish its visual flair in every frame, including some local marker that's supposed to denote the authenticity of its storytelling. Its characters are seen eating specific foods like empanadas and buñuelos and carrying hand-woven mochilas and hand-stitched embroidered dresses; they gesture with their pursed mouths and they dance to *salsa caleña*. The nods to everything from *One Hundred Years* (yellow butterflies are the film's visual leitmotif) to Medellín's flower festival (with *silleteros* making a brief cameo) to the colorful sight of Caño Cristales (the real-life, red-tinged riverbed where the film's opening scene takes place) dominate every scene.

Skirting the line between a bright-eyed travelogue and an encyclopedic compendium of Colombian culture, every moment in *Encanto* feels overdetermined. Every tile and plant and animal and piece of clothing and hand gesture and colloquialism has been painstakingly designed to exude "Colombianness." And while much of that work remains invisible to most viewers outside the country, it nevertheless structures the film's visual vocabulary: you may not immediately understand why Abuela uses her mouth to point or why characters use "Miércoles!" as a soft-pedaled curse word, but you're constantly nudged to think of everything on-screen as somehow culturally accurate and specific. Almost too specific. At times, even distractedly so. Such cultural markers (like the use of a *tiple*, a Colombian type of guitar, in Lin-Manuel Miranda's songs) draw so much attention to themselves that they come off as winking demonstrations of all the work its filmmakers, animators, and consultants tasked themselves in capturing a decidedly Colombian aesthetic.

Despite playing backdrop to these two wildly different movies, Colombia is no flattened exotic locale. Weerasethakul positioned himself and his leading player as foreigners cautiously if intimately exploring an increasingly mysterious and mystical land. In contrast, American directors Bush and Howard, Cuban-American codirector/cowriter Castro Smith, and the Puerto Rican songwriter Miranda strove to position their characters as inherently tied to the land they belong to.

One film acknowledged and embraced its exoticized gaze, making it the departure point for a wholly denaturalized experience; the other instead textured it to such a degree that the film could almost double as a richly rendered cultural exhibit. This is, perhaps, why even bringing these two films into conversation feels futile. After all, *Memoria* makes clear that Weerasethakul approached Colombia in search of kindred exoticism. His is a personal gaze that burrows itself into the landscapes in search of ghosts and stories, not to mention unsolved and perhaps unsolvable mysteries.

Meanwhile, in keeping with the corporate ethos that has defined Walt Disney Studios for decades now, *Encanto* emerges as nothing more than a commodification of Colombian culture on the part of a mostly US-based (and US-born) creative team who, while they may not be replicating the stereotypical world building seen in such classics as *The Three Caballeros* (Norman Ferguson, 1944), have nevertheless EPCOT-ized Colombia to the point where every marker of authenticity becomes nothing more than that: a mere sign that points solely to itself. Historical specificity, after all, is nowhere to be found; the violent men who kick off the film's prologue remain faceless and nameless, the better to obscure the real-life terrors *Encanto* can bring itself to acknowledge only in passing.

I can't deny I've become, in many ways, a foreigner in and to my own country. For someone who's lived abroad now for close to two decades, I experienced both films as welcome invitations to revisit my homeland through someone else's eyes, to see how it looks from afar yet to experience it as if from within. It'd be easy to discount *Encanto*'s charms, synthetic as they may be, and to uplift instead *Memoria*'s inscrutable narrative as more in keeping with the disorientating nature of Colombia's (ir)reality. Yet I find it more productive to think of these two projects in tandem, not as opposites or complementary features, but rather as twinned guides to what happens when one turns a camera or an animating brush onto a culture that is at once like and unlike oneself. And to ponder what it is that audiences are being asked to do when they (and I, too) are called upon to hum along to some songs—or pushed, instead, to hum along to silenced memories.

Notes

1. Gabriel García Márquez, "Nobel Lecture," www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1982/marquez/lecture.
2. Patrick Brzeski, "Apichatpong on Making 'Memoria' in Colombia with Tilda Swinton," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 7, 2021, www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/apichatpong-memoria-interview-1234976596/.