



The páramo elevation

(automated english translation, revised)

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1. Towards a cartographic critique

By linking film images, one could draw a map, not made of distances or coordinates, but of filmic and dramatic matter. This text is a map that leads to the highest parts of the equatorial mountains. By deciphering the landscape in filmic, biological and geological terms, perhaps we can also decipher the looks and emotions that emanate from the loneliness and the wind.

Maps are fallible and sometimes magical representations, full of tricks, errors, distortions and omissions. In the Middle Ages, they located biblical myths and the afterlife, fundamental elements for teaching the imaginary of the world. In 1809, Francisco José de Caldas published a translation of Alexander von Humboldt's *Geography of Plants*, which gives an account of their botanical expedition. In the preface to this edition, Caldas noted: "This work touches us very closely, they are our productions, we ourselves are the objects of which it is treated. [...] Respecting the enlightenment, the vast knowledge and the great talents of this extraordinary traveller, but we respect the truth all the more". After this, Caldas made 24 annotations in which he corrected the height of some mountains, the presence of some domestic species and the climate of some places, among other inaccuracies of the European expeditionary.

One of the big problems of cartography is that you cannot represent a spheroid planet in a two-dimensional plane. In the Mercator projection to which we are accustomed, what is higher or lower (the poles) is represented larger in relation to what is at the centre (the equator). Although this projection is geometrically pragmatic, it also reflects a hegemonic vision of the North over the world, which has been exercised over the cinematographic

apparatus, hypervisibilising the boreal world (Europe and North America) and rendering the intertropical world invisible. The map I present below has a projection contrary to the Mercator projection and its orientation point is the geographical location where I was born and from which I write: the slopes of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano.



Comparison of the actual size of equatorial countries on the European continent in the Mercator projection, created with thetruesize.com.

2. What is a páramo?

Most landscapes have been quickly codified in the history of cinema by American and European films; however, certain tropical landscapes remained unfiled for some time. One of them could be the jungle, but there was the broad colonising imagery of expedition and savagery that had led to its filming or falsification. The páramo, which is located mainly in Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela (and also in northern Peru and Costa Rica) would be

filmed very rarely. The oldest cinematographic reference was found in *Alma provinciana* (1926), by Félix Joaquín Rodríguez. On the distribution of space in this film, the theorist Juana Suárez commented:

The idea of nation is broader just because of the transit between the city and the lands of Santander. Furthermore, nature, although benign, is also presented as a challenge. This is suggested by Gerardo and his friend Julio's journey on horseback to the capital, which takes them through the difficult Páramo del Almorzadero, shown with attention by a series of camera sweeps. Added to the danger of the inhospitable wilderness is the stalking of Águila Negra, a local bandit who, along with his cronies, in a scene more comical than alarming, assaults them. [4]

Although Juana Suárez says that the allusion to the Páramo del Almorzadero confirms the geographical location of the film, it should also be said that the framing does not yet reveal much of this landscape; some silhouettes of rocky mountains, a small forest and a paddock can be seen. Nevertheless, its nature already reveals itself to be beautiful and gritty. It should also be noted that the páramos have been places of extreme conditions, indispensable for crossing the Colombian territory, which is divided by three Andean mountain ranges.

Another of the first images of the Colombian páramos was filmed by Claretian Father Jorge Restrepo in *La isla de los deseos* (1950). In a brief fragment, several missionaries appear on an ascent to the Nevado del Ruiz glacier to represent an enormous joy, such as being ordained a priest. Snow is almost excluded from the average Colombian's imagination, it is a very rare event.

In *El páramo de Cumanday* (1965), directed by Gabriela Samper and Ray Witlin, the páramo finally reveals itself to a young muleteer in a dream: "I am the memory of millions and millions of stagnant years, of perpetual ice caps melted by subterranean fires. I am the memory of the indefinite, in the beginning and in the end". Instead of being fascinated by the impression of the glacier, the directors prefer to leave the snow out of the frame and film the flora that covers the mountains and, above all, the customs and legends of the peasants. The páramo is the most biodiverse high mountain ecosystem on the planet.

The film follows an apprentice muleteer named Caloroso on a strange day when the spirit of the muleteer Luis Beltrán appears to him repeatedly on the mountain. With pedagogical interest, we are exposed to the different landscapes as the muleteer climbs the mountain, passing through the foggy forests, the low páramo characterised by small vegetation and the high páramo which is sandy and desert-like. The encounter with a forest of frailejones is one of the most striking moments: the character, suffocated in his search for the lost mules, decides to cut down a frailejón. The violence of this image is intended to shake us, but, seen in our time, it is contrary to us. Although Samper and Witlin succeeded in representing the imbalance between man and nature, perhaps they failed to identify human and agricultural action - as well as cinematographic action - as one of the main factors of pressure on the ecosystem.



El páramo de Cumanday (Gabriela Samper and Ray Witlin, 1965)

On the high páramo sands, the young Caloroso defeats the spirit of the muleteer Luis Beltrán in a duel with a machete. The fallen spirit gives him a final piece of advice: "To conquer the páramo, the muleteer has three weapons: to endure the cold, to master the loneliness, to love the barren and desolate immensity. This is how the owner of Cumanday spoke to me when I was dreaming". Cumanday is an old name for the Nevado del Ruiz. Its use reflects the importance of the mountain for pre-Columbian cultures. Samper and Witlin highlight the endemism and biodiversity; the wind and the fog, the solitude, the mystery and the legend, and the deep exploitation of the land. This film encapsulates many of the ideas and sensations that future filmmakers will encounter again when confronted with the same mountains.

3. The spirit of the mountain

The frailejon, wrapped in its creamy yellow wool, is religious; a pure religiosity, which also accompanies the snow, the crater and the sandbanks. Fernando González Ochoa, *Journey on Foot*, 1929

In front of the páramo, the silence and the cold make for an encounter with oneself. The border between oneself and the mountains, the wind and the frailejones is dissociated. In the paramo landscape, a sense of romantic transcendence and correspondence with the world persists, reminiscent of a primitive humanity and of the glacial periods that our ancestors managed to survive.

In her essay *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea*, Erika Balsom dialogues with André Bazin's idea that by returning to the sea, man returns to his origins. Balsom concludes:

Whatever the case, at stake is a fantasy of primordial undifferentiation, of self- annihilation. This return obliterates the ego and undoes the hubris of rationality and its categories –including the distinctions between man and animal, culture and nature. Certainty cedes to unknowing. Better to give oneself over to the sea rather than pretend that we stand sovereign, able to fully fathom its depths [2]

The solitude of the páramo activates remote places in human nature and psyche. In *Siete cabezas* (2017) by Jaime Osorio Márquez, a park ranger, Marcos, guides two biologists studying the mass death of birds in the Chingaza National Natural Park, the largest páramo in the world. For Marcos, the loneliness of his work has led to a mental disorder of wanting to amputate body parts. With the death of the birds and the arrival of the biologist couple, Marcos sees the signs of the Apocalypse fulfilled. Life and death, which are in tension in nature, also strain the flagellant body of Mark, who cares for the natural life and aims for the end of time.



Seven Heads (Jaime Osorio Márquez, 2017)

New filmmakers in the 2010s became interested in filming different Colombian and Venezuelan landscapes. In particular, Osorio Márquez took advantage of the native high mountain landscape to transpose a kind of horror or mystery. In his first film, *El páramo* (2011), a military squadron has to retake a base with which communication has been lost. The military do not understand the supernatural nature of the situation, only the “Indian” Fiquitiva sees mysterious signs after the appearance of a woman locked behind a wall. Some characters die at the hands of the witch, but others kill each other out of arrogance, ambition and idleness; the danger was not in the curse, but among themselves. In the isolation of the páramo cold, the characters are enclosed in the open air and the drama unfolds within each of them.

In *Luz* (2019), directed by Juan Diego Escobar Alzate, a supposed prophet and his daughters live in a small cabin. The film is shot in an alien ecosystem: the pine forest. The exclusion of the páramo reveals the monoculture of logging pine, an invasive species that poses multiple threats to the ecosystem and has replaced large sections of the Andean forest. Perhaps - in the filmmakers' imagination - the pine tree serves the film as a visual code to insert itself into an international horror genre.

In *La sirga* (William Vega, 2012), Alicia arrives at Laguna de La Cocha to stay with her uncle, whom she will help to adapt his house as a hostel. It seems that Alicia has been displaced by violence and hopes to find refuge in the páramo. A first act is conspicuous by its absence: what has happened to this woman? It is only through Alicia's sleepwalking that a trauma from the fire becomes evident. The narrative focuses on the small moments, on the minimal tensions, on a desolate emotion exacerbated by the wind. The first and penultimate shots show a man hanging. The film tries to understand how war operates in the individual and takes advantage of uncertainty to reveal the tactics of fear that constitute war, as opposed to media visions. The second shot shows a small island moving through the water that is a bad omen among the inhabitants of the lagoon. The third shot shows us some enormous frailejones among which Alice moves, as if by inertia, before falling down in a faint.



La sirga (William Vega, 2012)

4. The ancestral fire

In *Nuestra voz de tierra, memoria y futuro* (1981), Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva bear witness to the struggle of the Kokonuko indigenous people to recover the land that had been occupied since the 17th century. One sequence tells the story of two cattle that get lost in the sandy areas at the top of the Puracé volcano. A couple of men set off in search of them and find a corral with some cattle, guarded by the butler of a hacienda, who wears a devil's mask. Through quick cuts and camera movements, the butler's face is superimposed on that of a monster and then on that of the landowner, whose spurs are also compared to those of the statue of the conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar. In the end, the two men return to the resguardo, where they say that the cows were taken by the devil.



Our Voice of Land, Memory and Future (Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva, 1981)

The directors interpret the myths surrounding the devil and the bad winds as a pragmatic mystification that serves the inhabitants as a metaphor for the limitless ambition of the colonising race. One of their testimonies says that the Puracé Mines are the effect of a pact with the devil, who every year takes the lives of one or more miners so that the multinational Celanese can make a profit. However, mining also leaves in the páramo is deep erosion of the land and contamination of water sources. Even today, mining constitutes one of the greatest risks to the ecosystem, as in the case of the current controversy over the mining project in the Santurbán Páramo. Instead of taking a sceptical stance towards the myths, the film shapes them with dramatisations such as the supernatural interpretation of a pact with the devil: "Pa' eso dicen también que debe ser de bastante de espíritu para hacerse un encuentro con él". ("For that they say that you have to have enough spirit, to have an encounter with him.")

The eruption of Nevado del Ruiz in 1985 was the worst natural catastrophe in Colombia. The pyroclastic material melted a huge section of glacier that rushed down the mountain until it reached the valley, where it covered the entire town of Armero in a single moment, killing more than twenty thousand people. In the documentary *El valle sin sombras* (Rubén Mendoza, 2015), some survivors tell their testimony from the ruins of the houses they once lived in. The wounds are compounded by commonly ignored facts such as child trafficking, abuse by the police and the Red Cross, and the devastating personal experiences of emerging from the earth. From a helicopter, Mendoza films what could be one of the last

majestic images of this glacier and then follows the path the avalanche took along the Lagunilla riverbed until it reaches the abandoned village. Mendoza writes:

I still find it hard to think about the rhythm of things, the size: a moving mountain, advancing at a rate of a hundred metres every five seconds, dragging rows of people, of cars, that is joining the walls of the houses on the ground, the roofs, making a homogeneous mixture, like an apocalyptic blender, crushing men, women and children with huge stones, with trucks, chewing them up with machinery, with church saints. [8]



The valley without shadows (Rubén Mendoza, 2015)

I wanted to return to this summit, which serves as an orientation point for my map of scattered places. I myself have filmed on its mountains and wondered about the historical, biological and geographical coherence of its images. The glacier area of this volcano has diminished and three glaciers in Los Nevados National Park have disappeared, becoming the Paramillos de Cisne, Santa Rosa and Quindío. The process of deglaciation has not only been accelerated by climate change, but also by the constant eruptions of ash. The imminent disappearance of the glaciers will have irrevocable effects on our geological and ecological memory.

On the internet there are hundreds of videos of this glacier made by tourists and researchers, with drones or monitoring cameras. These digital images record every second of an era that is melting before our eyes, an era that needs cartographers (critics, video essayists and programmers) who use the images to map out and give relevance to the seas of information. It is not enough to watch films through the eyes of biology or geology, but to use their methods and concepts. Scientific thinking must be understood as a free, experimental and unstable affair, not so far from what cinema is. ©

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

[11](#) Francisco José de Caldas, "Prefación a la geografía de las plantas" in *Obras completas de Francisco José de Caldas: publicadas por la Universidad Nacional de Colombia como homenaje con motivo del sesquicentenario de su muerte 1816*, Bogotá, Imprenta Nacional, 1966, pp. 383-399.

[21](#) Juana Suárez, *Cinembargo Colombia: Ensayos críticos sobre cine y cultura*, Cali, Editorial Universidad del Valle, 2009, p. 37.

[31](#) Erika Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea*, Wellington, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2018, p. 38. (T. of A.).

[41](#) Rubén Mendoza, "[Volar en un solo pie](#)" in *Revista Universo Centro* No. 71, Medellín, 2015. {Last reviewed online 6 March 2021}.