



## CHAPTER 8

# THROUGH “THEIR” EYES

## INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FOCALIZING AGENTS IN THE REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN AND VIOLENCE IN IBERIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN FILM

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### APPROACHES TO THE REPRESENTATION(ING) AND FOCALIZATION(ING) OF CHILDHOOD VIOLENCE

SOCIALLY MOTIVATED FILMMAKING INVOLVING ISSUES OF CHILDREN and violence often oscillates uneasily between two opposing tendencies: the committed and the exploitative film. As Owain Jones claims, the depiction of violence by and against children is in itself a powerful and significant theme “because of the way society considers children as natural and vulnerable, the violence that they, and all, are exposed to is more visible” (201–2). One way in which films about children and youth violence might engage viewers politically and avoid the exploitative element is by bringing the adult spectator’s perception closer to the child’s subjective experience and worldview through the use of inner focalization. The focus of this essay shall be on the children, the violence directed against them or committed by them, and how the degree of voice and focalization they are allowed by the filmic style might either activate the audience’s deepest fears or elicit sympathy and understanding, perhaps even empathy.<sup>1</sup> To explore these concerns I will examine two very different films that depict the lives of marginalized urban children and youth: *Rodrigo D: No futuro*<sup>2</sup> (Víctor Gaviria 1990) from Colombia and *El Bola* (Acheró Mañas 2000) from Spain.<sup>3</sup>



Producing a socially committed film that depicts children faithfully, while allowing them a space of their own, is a daunting task. The tenuous boundary separating the exploitative misery porn from the committed social film might hinge on the connection that the spectator forges with the characters through a conflation of looks (of the camera, of the character, of the spectator). The success or failure of this *conflation* of looks is itself dependent on the spectator's bridging of a complex multilayered otherness that constitutes the characters, an otherness founded on cultural, linguistic, and more importantly for this essay, age-based differences.

By depicting children who are often trapped in spaces of abjection,<sup>4</sup> and confined by the claustrophobic poverty of the urban or sub-urban slums that surround them, these films attempt a social critique of the status quo. Children are specially poised to represent issues of marginality, on account of their special condition of alterity. According to Naomi Sokoloff, children are "the objects on whom adults foist their highest hopes and deepest fears and insecurities"; and, by virtue of their constant growth and change, they challenge adults' fixed attitudes, and therefore "children figures in narrative may serve to put into relief with special acuity the limited understandings, feelings, and perceptions of those who attempt to describe them" (239). How might the child's perspective be articulated or "focalized," to use Gérard Genette's (and Mieke Bal's) term, in the narratives of violence? Is the articulation of a child's perspective desirable, or possible, from an adult subject position?

Answering these questions might prove quite challenging. The degree to which the narrative might, at least in theory, adopt (focalize) the perspective of the child might go from one extreme (complete detachment of the spectator from the child) to its opposite, an idealized merging with the child's perspective (complete identification of the spectator with the child). Clearly, the position and use of the camera has much to do with this, as it serves the function of situating the spectator within a particular perspective. In a case of minimal focalization, the *detached* camera position is not aligned with any of the actors' point of view (POV); in an external focalization approach the perspective of one character is established through occasional POV shots and by following the character around; and in an internal focalization (the third case and closest to a complete identification), this approach is achieved by aligning the camera with the characters' exact POV, looking through his or her eyes. Naturally, this articulates the child's physical perspective, while his psychological or mental subjectivity is much more difficult to render, possibly outside of the adult filmmaker's capabilities, unless the child or youth actors are given a great deal of participation/voice in the process of the

film's creation. It is altogether a different question to consider whether this type of narrative exercise is desirable or whether it amounts to a colonizing practice that imposes adult perspectives and forms of age-based oppression on the young actors/characters. Considered from this angle the adult narrative might be construed as *forcing* an adult identification on the child character, collapsing adult and child perspectives in a way that effaces the child's subjectivity and the profound differences between children and adults. Furthermore these representations of children, well intentioned or not, might result in "regimes and spaces of control, care and provision and assumptions about what individual children are and what they need. For example the vulnerable, incompetent notions of childhood can lead to children's lives being highly restricted in terms of autonomous engagement with the environment" (Jones 201). The counter argument that promotes the importance of attempting to make films from a child's or youth's perspective claims that it is desirable to do so, to the extent that the film might construct a model or worldview in which "viewing knowledge as position-dependent enhances one's ability to imagine standpoint's different from one's own," to empathize with an "other" (Margolin 41).

The issues I have outlined thus far are best answered in the context of specific films about children. From the slums of Medellín called "cinturones de miseria" (misery belts) to the working-class neighborhoods in Madrid (such as Carabanchel or Lavapiés), children who are ignored, abused, or abandoned by their families, the state, and society at large, find a voice in the films I will examine. In the case of *Rodrigo D*, the family plays virtually no role in the lives of the teen characters, while in *El Bola* the family unit is dysfunctional and plays a negative role in the child's life. These children inhabit large geographical peripheries or nomadic spaces of abjection where those displaced by poverty, drugs, and armed conflict (Colombia) or by urban growth and immigration patterns (Spain) attempt to organize their lives amid chaos and violence. *Rodrigo D* deals with the impact of street violence, drugs, and urban decay on a group of young adolescents in the slums of Medellín's *comunas* (poor neighborhoods). In *El Bola*, we are presented with a story of domestic violence, the case of a child whose father physically and psychologically abuses him.

Both films have generated debates about what type of genre they belong to, and whether they are motivated by political and social intent. Both films strive toward a *realist* portrayal of children's lives, and both projects are potentially frustrated by issues of spectator interpretation. Their filmmaking approaches differ greatly: *El Bola* uses a mostly professional cast (with the exception of the child actors), continuity editing,

and a crisp scripted style, which arguably conforms to classical Hollywood films. *Rodrigo D* uses a gritty style (and no binding script), at times neorealist and at times bordering on amateur or experimental cinema, freely combining long static shots with handheld camera takes, and using a cast of nonprofessional adolescent actors.

Beyond these genre considerations, both films, I would argue, purport to offer the child's perspective, to *focalize* the child. Focalization, according to Mieke Bal, is "the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen,' perceived" ("Focalization" 116). *Rodrigo D* uses internal focalization, while *El Bola* resorts to external focalization. As Bal defines these categories, "when focalization lies within one character which participates in the *fabula* [story] as an actor, we can refer to *internal* focalization. We can then indicate by means of the term *external* focalization that an anonymous agent, situated outside the *fabula*, is functioning as focalizer" ("Focalization" 119). Expanding on the definition and clarifying the role of the focalizer, Bal states that in internal focalization, "the 'focalized' character sees," while in external focalization "s/he does not see, s/he is seen" (*Narrative Theory* 270). The use of several of the adolescents as internal focalizers (as we both see *them* and see *through their eyes*) in *Rodrigo D* serves the purpose of approaching the adult spectator to the youth's subjectivity, while the preponderance of an external focalizer in *El Bola* (where mainly we see Pablo from an external POV) results in a less direct identification with its child protagonist, as the spectator adopts the position of the sympathetic and protective (but distanced) adult. In the first instance, we are made to *feel* what the Colombian youths feel; in the second, we only *observe* what the Madrid children experience. In *Rodrigo D* this focal position is further complicated since the intimate filming style (i.e., gritty neorealist aesthetic, point-of-view shots) serves to meld the external and internal focalizers, achieving a conflating effect described by Bal: "The identification between the external focalizer in visual images and an internal focalizer represented in the image can [. . .] give rise to such a conflation, which would then strengthen the appeal to identification" (*Narratology* 164). The (simplified) assumption is that *Rodrigo D* renders the adolescents as free subjects with a degree of agency, while *El Bola* renders the child protagonist as an innocent victim deserving of our sympathy and protection, but/because he is unable to fend for himself. Next we will examine in what specific ways Víctor Gaviria's film *Rodrigo D* activates focalization to render a narrative of youth violence and hopelessness in Medellín, Colombia.

**INTERNAL FOCALIZER(S) IN *RODRIGO D: NO FUTURO* AND THE EXPLOITATION OF THE IMAGE**

*Rodrigo D* puts on display the daily life of a group of adolescent friends (*parcheros*) in the mean streets of the Comuna Nororiental (Medellín) as they seek entertainment and street credit through crime in a city that offers them no future. These nonprofessional actors *acted* real-life scenarios following a loose script, which was altered as circumstances developed, influenced by Italian neorealism as well as the tradition of *testimonio*. The looseness of the script and familiar setting facilitated a blending of reality and fiction, further enhanced through the reality of violence in the adolescent actors' lives. In *Rodrigo D*, art and life were so intertwined that several of the film's young protagonists involved in the criminal life of the *sicarios* (hitmen) or *pistolocos* (hired guns) met violent death even before the film's completion. The film serves to document the intersection between youth culture and drug violence in Medellín.<sup>5</sup>

After its release the film was attacked by some Colombian critics, both because of the tragic outcomes of the lives of its actors and because of the perception that it glorified the life of the cartels' *pistolocos*. Admittedly the premature, violent deaths of several adolescent participant *nonactors* pose ethical questions, as does the questionable dedication eulogizing them in the end credits.<sup>6</sup> This is why, on this account, *Rodrigo D* might be said to traffic in images, drawing on our fascination (at once attraction and repulsion) with poverty and violence, to produce a sterile and disconcerting film presenting an aestheticized violence that permeates the narrative and resides on all sides of society: the *legal* violence of the state (as represented by the torture and death of Johncito at the hands of paramilitaries) and the *delinquent* violence the teens engage in (as represented by the thefts, carjackings, mock knife fights, and the murder in the final scene). Rodrigo—the only character that might have some future for himself—commits suicide, ending his life through a desperate act of self-violence.

The shocking last sequence attempts (perhaps hopelessly) to merge the subjectivities of child character/actor and adult spectator through its cinematic technique and affective force. The senseless killing of one of the boys, Ramón, situates the spectator within the uncomfortable POV of the teenage victim, a stylistic move that warrants further discussion. Ramón's death scene(s) frames (or bookends) Rodrigo's suicide, creating a balanced triptych of despair. After considerable drinking and belligerent chatting with his fellow *pistolocos*, Adolfo (the ringleader) and his friends run into the hapless Ramón, who is wanted by the police and threatens to attract them to the neighborhood. Having already been warned to

**This is a partial preview of the essay.**

**To read the entire essay please see *Representing History, Class, and Gender in Spain and Latin America: Children and Adolescents in Film*. Eds. Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet. Palgrave Macmillan. (2012).**

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