

Requiem NN/Juan Manuel Ecchavarria

October 10, 2013 | Requiem NN: Colombia

*In the town of Puerto Berrío, Colombia, where the violence between drug gangs and paramilitary groups reached its peak, the villagers rose up in defiance of the brutality that was ruling their lives. Every day they would rescue the dead bodies that floated down their river, anonymous bodies of men and women “disappeared,” bodies with no names—NNs. The villagers adopted these NNs, giving them names and decent burials, baptizing them in the cemetery, bringing them birthday cakes to celebrate the lives they once had. Colombian visual artist **Juan Manuel Ecchavarria** turned to filmmaking to capture these amazing rituals and the stories behind them. **Availability:** The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, October 8-14. Thanks to Andrea Betanzos, Cinema Tropical, for arranging this interview.*



As he floats down the river, a fisherman looks for dead bodies--victims of Colombia's horrific violence.

DT: In Puerto Berrío, people call the dead bodies of people who died from the violence NNs—no names. They fish the NNs out of the river, adopt them, and give them names in exchange for protection granted by the dead. This is based upon the belief that souls in purgatory have the power to help the living. Is this straight Catholic doctrine, or is it a local variation?

JME: It's very, very Catholic. This belief happens in many other villages, but the difference is that in Puerto Berrío the souls of the dead are baptized. In the Catholic religion people can ask favors of the souls of the dead, but in Puerto Berrío, they baptize corpses that have no name. They baptize them in the cemetery.

DT: How did that practice come about?

JME: Puerto Berrío has had a long history of violence, of murdered and disappeared people. I think it's a reconstruction of the social fabric by naming these people through the ritual of saying, *We adopt them, we give them names, we give them our surnames*. I think it's a necessity to have a cathartic experience in the midst of great violence.

DT: Can you describe in greater detail the function of the *animero*, *sepulturero*, and *carretillero*?

JME: The *animero* is the soul keeper. He's the medium, the person who intervenes between the living and the dead during the whole month of November. He calls in the people to come and pray and leads a procession in the cemetery and the town. He's the one who believes in the souls. The *carretillero* picked up many, many, many dead bodies in the streets during the '80s, and he became blind because of the formaldehyde. He never protected his hands, and he would wipe his hands in his eyes. He seems to come out of a Goya painting or a Greek tragedy. And then you have the *sepulturero*, the gravedigger. He knows the stories behind the graves, the stories of the NNs, the stories of those he buries. He, too, is like someone in Greek mythology—Charon, who takes souls to the other shore in his boat.

DT: How widespread is the practice in the town? Are people ostracized if they don't believe in or take part in the ritual?

JME: No, there are people who do not believe in the ritual and who do not participate, but there are many many, many who do. It's a huge ritual that began in the very early '80s when the violence in Colombia was at a peak. It was necessary for people to deal with violence in a cathartic way.

DT: Are the people who don't participate ostracized in any way?



BLANCA NURY BUSTAMANTE, mother of seven children, takes in laundry at home and cleans houses. Her daughter Lizeth and her son Jhon Jairo have disappeared.

JME: God, no. Not at all. It's a very tolerant part of the country. Everyone in the village knows there's this ritual, but the wealthier people don't adopt the souls of the dead. It's people who are in need of someone to give them a hand. It's mostly people in the margins of society who have the practice of adopting the souls of these nameless people.

DT: First they move the bodies from a grave to an ossuary?

JME: Correct. That's a Catholic practice in Colombia. First the body is put in a grave, then a few years later, the body must be removed to an ossuary because the graves are needed for new bodies.

DT: This applies to everybody in Colombia?

JME: Yes.

DT: But at the same time, I believe the practice has a very practical side. As you said, it makes room in the graves, but it also allows the bodies to be identified. If they weren't moved to an ossuary, they would just be thrown in a mass grave, where they couldn't be ID'd.

JME: This is a very important point you're making. What the ritual does is preserve those bodies for hope, for the future, in the sense that the NNs are preserved in the ossuary so that one day someone will be able to find out their DNA and return those bodies to a family. This is important. If the bodies go into a mass grave, they're all scrambled together, while if the NN is taken to an ossuary, he or she is preserved there.

DT: So it's not just a practical byproduct of the ritual: it's one of their reasons for doing it.

JME: The law says that you have to take a dead body from the tomb after five years, but if no one comes for that body, it goes immediately to the mass grave, where all the bodies are scrambled together. With so many bodies, how can you find out which is an NN, a body with no name? The investigation for a forensic doctor becomes impossible, while if the NN is in an ossuary, his genetic reading can be done. That's a very important point, and I hope I've made it clear to you.

DT: Since 2007, civilians aren't allowed to touch the corpses in the river. Has this changed the practice, and if so, has that changed the village?

JME: Nowadays when the fishermen see a body, they tie it to a tree and tell the officials there's a body there. The practice has changed because the institutions are against ritual. The Church doesn't want the villagers to paint the tombs with colors, and the officials don't want the bodies to be fished out by the people of the village.



The villagers of Puerto Berrio rebel against the violence by adopting the souls of the nameless dead.

JME: But I think this ritual is important because collectively the people of Puerto Berrio are saying, *We don't allow these bodies to disappear*. This is the main objective of the perpetrators of violence—to disappear those bodies, to leave no evidence by throwing the bodies into the rivers for the vultures and the fish. So I think that the people of Puerto Berrio are saying, *We rescue those bodies. We bury those bodies. We ask those bodies with no names for favors. We take care of their tombs. We baptize them in death. We even give them our names. We make them belong to us.*

DT: That's very, very powerful.

JME: It's a country that has lived for so long in war. Over fifty years. This is the first time I've seen a village give its back to the violence, with those dead bodies that are brought by the river into their village. I think it's a great gesture of humanity and a great gesture of resistance against the perpetrators of violence.

DT: You speak about this with great emotion.

JME: I need you to understand this.

DT: At one point they bring one of the NNs a birthday cake and sing happy birthday to her. Is there a special symbolism to bringing the dead a birthday cake? That was particularly moving.

JME: What I find extraordinary in the symbolism of the birthday cake is that it's a ritual of those who are alive. It's not about the morbidity of death; it's those who are alive and saying, *How do we deal with these people are dead? Well, we celebrate their birthdays in their burial.* They not only baptize them but they sing them a happy birthday, too. It sounds very magical, but actually it's not about magic realism, it's about tragic realism. The dead body of the NN who was baptized as Gloria, whose birthday is being celebrated in her grave—she was a disappeared person from a family in Colombia. So it's about tragic realism, yes?

DT: You normally work in photography and video, representing the violence in Colombia and its effect on ordinary lives. Why did you choose this as the subject of so much of your art?

JME: Because that's our reality. The war has been going on for over fifty years, and I didn't want to give my back to this reality. I look at it but through art, through metaphor, through symbolism, not through the horrors. I never show my work with blood over blood. I make it visible so people will open up their conscience to the horrors we have had in Colombia.

DT: Can you explain the healing function of art?

JME: Let me answer you this way. On my website I have a video called [Mouths of Ash](#). There you see singers who have witnessed or survived massacres and transformed what they saw into song. Song is also an artform. And in that artform, in that transformation of the horror into song, is catharsis. There, in Mouths of Ash, you see the cathartic function of art.

DT: As you said, it's a cathartic experience for the person who says, *This is what I've seen*, but what does it do for the audience? What does it do beyond catharsis?

JME: I hope it makes people think about the horrors. I hope it opens up spaces of reflection and spaces of emotion. Art can do this. It has done it with me many times.

DT: This was your first film. Are you going to continue making films?

JME: If I have a story that I think should be visualized, I will go on doing film, but I must have a story to tell. I felt this story in Puerto Berrío had to be told by the people who adopt the NNs, by the people who do the rituals. I was a writer for thirty years before I was a visual artist. In my videos I see short stories. In this film I see the novel.

DT: And in your photography?

JME: In my photography I see my sentences.

Copyright © Director Talk 2013

Courtesy Strand Releasing.