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ENERGY JUSTICE IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Extractive Geographies in Sponsored Media: Colombia's Large-Scale Coal Mining in the 1980s

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This article examines corporate and institutional visual media surrounding the early years of the Cerrejón coal mine in Colombia. The analysis of a varied corpus of educational television, magazine photography, and a short film made by Exxon shows how an extractive enterprise sought to present its impacts as contained and justified. Images and narratives produced an illusion of geographical and temporal separation between the mine and the lifeworlds it impacted. While the material repeats well-known tropes of modernization and the technological sublime, it also works in specific ways within a context that produced sacrifice zones in Indigenous territories.

Cerrejón North Block is Colombia's largest coal mine, an open-pit operation that started production in 1985. It is a typical extractive enclave, with rail and port infrastructure that connects it to energy markets around the world, while creating a local sacrifice zone (Göbel and Ulloa 2014, 15–16). Developed by a transnational oil corporation and the Colombian state in the context of fluctuating energy prices and a balance-of-trade crisis, the project was politically controversial at the time, and continues to be a site of socio-environmental conflict. This article approaches the institutional and corporate construction of Cerrejón North Block through visual and narrative choices in sponsored film, video, and print magazines produced by project stakeholders during the infrastructure development and early production stages, between 1980 and 1989. Applying a critical geography perspective to these archival materials, textual analysis shows how sponsored media reproduce extractive ways of seeing the territory and the lifeworlds it sustains.

The mine started out as a joint venture between Exxon's subsidiary Intercor and Carbocol, a fully owned Colombian state enterprise that had been constituted for this purpose with participation from the state's oil corporation. This case study thus offers a story of coal's intersection with petroculture, at a particular moment of instability in global energy markets. As fossil fuel companies continue to expand their energy portfolios, this story challenges the "petromyopia" that has sometimes resulted in academic compartmentalization between fuels (Jones 2016). The critical geography

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approach proposed here pays attention to the specificities of coal as a material and of open-pit mining as a process of environmental transformation. This approach identifies three discursive strategies used in sponsored media to enable and legitimize the Cerrejón project in its early years: colonial deterritorialization, spatiotemporal containment, and selective infrastructural visibility.

The first part of the article focuses on public service television, showing how a narrative of national interest was embedded in the dissemination of Cerrejón images through distance learning programs. Publicly funded television articulated the institutional justification of a sacrifice zone in the interest of development, while reproducing centralist forms of power that marginalized the Indigenous Wayúu population. I then move to discuss Exxon's public relations approaches to the project, focusing on a series of articles published in their cultural magazine *Lámpara* and a short film. The use of images in these media systems serves to visually manage and compartmentalize the mine's impact on the environment and on communities. Both public and corporate sponsored media work to make the extractive bargain seem appealing by drawing boundaries around its negative impacts, projecting fantasies of mastery over the unruly effects of environmental and sociocultural disruption.

Cerrejón in Context

The mine is located in La Guajira, a semidesert region shared by Colombia and Venezuela, with a peninsula on the Caribbean Sea. The Colombian government's decision in 1975 to invite companies to explore and exploit its coal deposits was taken in the heat of global energy market instability, which compounded fiscal problems with political consequences. The Liberal Party governments spanned by the early stages of the project pursued an export-oriented economic model that favored private investment (Strambo and González Espinosa 2020, 935). The spike in oil prices caused by the OPEC embargo in 1973 had made coal more attractive, particularly for oil companies with the capital to develop large-scale opencast pits and transnational markets (Koerner, Rutledge, and Wright 1995, 662). Meanwhile, Colombia's foreign debt was increasing, in part due to the gap between its oil production and consumption, which had to be covered with expensive imports (Fraser 2011, 200; Philip 1982, 130). The logic was simple: "we will sell coal to buy oil" (Galán 1982, 84, author's translation). The largest corporation in the world at the time, Exxon had started buying coal deposits in the United States in the 1960s and had investments in Australia and Canada, as well as Rotterdam's coal port.[1] Exxon had a long history in Colombia and a strong relationship with the ruling elites, as will be discussed

1 "Coal Comes Back." 1983. *Exxon News*, March. Exxon Archives, Briscoe Centre for American History, University of Texas.

below, and was chosen to develop the project. Large-scale coal mining in Colombia thus emerged in continuity with the oil sector, rather than in competition with it, and with a very clear export intention, targeting power plants in the United States and Europe.

A key point of contention from the beginning was the asymmetry of the partnership between the world's largest corporation and a newly minted, underfunded, and understaffed state agency created for the purpose of this project. This reflects the transnational inequity of extractivism, which, furthermore, operates through a "fractal structure of cores and peripheries" (Riofrancos 2020). While Colombia was drawn into a position of structural dependency, La Guajira was imagined from the national core as an extractive frontier, and this colonial signification of the territory was key to its viability as mining enclave. As Kathryn Yusoff writes, "The consequence of [colonialism as an extraction project] was the organization of racializing logics that maps onto and locks into the formation of extractable territories and subjects" (2018, 84). The racialization of the region's inhabitants has profound consequences for the narratives of national development that surround the mine.

In the 1985 population census, the Colombian administrative province (departamento) of La Guajira reported nearly three hundred thousand inhabitants; as of 2018, the population had grown to nearly one million, of whom 47.8 percent are members of an Indigenous ethnic group (DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística) 1986, 2019). The largest of these groups, and the most directly impacted by large-scale coal mining, is the Wayúu. The mine-railway-port complex, traversing the province from south to north, fragmented Wayúu, Afro-Colombian, and campesino territories; since then, mine expansion has affected key water sources and displaced entire villages (Ulloa 2020, 10–11). However, when evaluating the "social impacts" of Cerrejón in 1995, the company was able to point to income growth and assistance programs for Indigenous people, involving mobile health care, enterprise credit, and training (Econometría Consultores 1998). The delegation of the state's functions to the corporation forces communities to depend on the mine (Knöpfel 2020). As Pablo Jaramillo and Susana Carmona have argued, this capture is part of a process of "temporal enclosure," in which "discourses of time and the future function as strategies to reproduce extractive industries" (2022, 12). The viability of extraction thus relies partially on symbolic strategies, such as those mobilized by corporate film and video.

Extractivism and Sponsored Media

This analysis of the media narratives and images of the Cerrejón project is aligned with the growing scholarship in the environmental and energy humanities that has examined the interdependence between visual cultures and fossil fuel industries (Stewart 2016, 329). Relative to oil, coal has received

less attention within this body of work, although cinema's relationship to coal is long-running and plural. From the productivism of Vertov's *Enthusiasm: The Symphony of Donbas* (1931) to the solastalgia of Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* (2015), coal films have told "stories of modernity, growth and emancipation as well as of exploitation and exhaustion" (Pisters 2022). These stories have changed as the world's dominant energy regimes have shifted away from burning of local deep-mined coal in Europe and large-scale open-pit mining for bulk shipping. This case study is situated precisely at that junction, in the years leading up to the UK miners' strike and during the expansion of coal exports from South Africa and Australia. The emergence of large-scale open-pit mining requires new ways of attending to spatiality, spectacle, technology, and temporality in the media that accompanied it.

A focus on sponsored media has been a key contribution from recent film scholarship on oil, such as the 2021 edited collection *Petrocinema* (Dahlquist and Vonderau 2021). Film and video produced by oil companies is the most overt form of "petrocinema," but it is by no means a monolithic one. Contributors to that volume find such industrial films produced for many types of audiences, for in-house or public screening, with perfunctory or highly ambitious formal strategies, accompanying oil multinationals in their global expansion. National governments often dedicated public resources to communicating oil's promises of progress, as they had done with coal. Beyond naked advertising and persuasion, however, the editors argue that these films often acted in "micropolitical" ways, integrating oil and its derivatives within emergent consumer cultures, as well as legitimating and enabling big oil's reconstruction of political systems and international trade.

Sponsored petrocinema is best understood within the history of corporate and state practices of "public relations," which have been described by Grieveson as instrumental to consolidating the "political and economic rationalities" of transnational capitalism in the twentieth century (Grieveson 2017, 3). As climate campaigners and organizations like Art Not Oil and Culture Unstained have highlighted, oil companies have entrenched their cultural influence through patronage and investment in arts, culture, education, and extension (Damluji 2021, 25). These interventions have been diverse and adapted to national contexts, but they generally aim to forge links between oil extraction and national development, and to curry favor with local elites, including influential cultural workers. Rudmer Canjels (2017, 81) notes that Shell-BP hired writer and activist Wole Soyinka to do the voice-over for the 1961 documentary *The Search for Oil in Nigeria*. In Venezuela, as in Colombia and several other countries, Standard Oil hired "artists, writers and politicians" for its cultural magazine (Zazzarino 2022), while in Australia in the 1970s, Shell sponsored influential nature television series (Smaill 2021, 76). In calling Mexican cinema a "petrocinema," Carolyn Fornoff (2021) has pointed out how the state's funding of the arts, including film, has also been

dependent on oil revenues. The relationship between fossil fuels and visual culture is not, then, simply one of representation or persuasion, but often a material and financial one.

Approaches from critical ecological economics are useful to describe the specific inflections of colonialism and extractivism that media mobilize around mining. The present study draws on the concept of "valuation languages," as the ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics used to judge the worth of things and to define desirable futures (Cardoso 2018). Valuation languages are constituted in the context of socioenvironmental or "ecological distribution conflicts," through discursive practices including visual media.[2] As Brian Jacobson argues, "[t]he extraction industry [...] is driven by images and hides itself behind them" (2018). Studying the images and narratives of opencast coal mining is a way to grasp these valuation languages in their more concrete expression, which responds to the materiality of the mining process but also to the specific entanglements of local and global media histories.

The global hegemony of fossil fuel industries is important context to understand Cerrejón and its visual discourses. However, more local approaches are also needed to illuminate how extractivism operates on the ground. Sponsored media texts and practices are overdetermined, shaped not just by ideological projects but also by material and institutional conditions of production and exhibition, including who commissioned the film, on what occasion, addressed to whom, and for what purpose (Hediger and Vonderau 2009). In Colombia, the rise and permanence of fossil fuel extraction as a national economic strategy has been the result of policy decisions taken under unequal conditions and reflecting intranational power hierarchies. The valuation languages forged around the resulting environmental conflicts also organize image choices, and montage produces links and narratives that work under their logics. The fact that media sponsored by the Colombian state and media produced by Exxon's public relations department had vastly different levels of resources and access at their disposal is neither surprising nor independent of a long history of corporate dispossession.

Public Service Television

In the 1980s, educational content on public service television platformed institutional discourses, interpellating viewers into narratives of national development through resource extraction. Content sponsored by Carbocol-Intercor or produced with their support started appearing on educational television at the start of the 1980s, with two programs about the construction

2 Ecological distribution conflicts are "struggles that emerge from the structural asymmetries in the distribution of the burdens of pollution, the different levels of sacrifice made to extract resources, or from the discrepancies in the access to natural resources" (Cardoso 2018, 45).

of the port and the railway.[3] Adult distance-learning students completing their primary education in 1985 had many opportunities to marvel at the riches of opencast mining, even if most of them would never visit the Cerrejón mine. Geography, social sciences, and natural sciences classes produced by the public service broadcaster often discussed the mine, and a math program even taught potentiation through coal-loading trucks. At the end of the math program, in typical fashion, the presenter expresses the hope that coal "will be the country's economic salvation."[4] This hope needed to be verbalized, as the images of trucks and dust clouds could be ambiguous. Cerrejón was a controversial undertaking, due to the large amount of foreign debt acquired to fund it, the perceived unfairness in the distribution of profits with a foreign company, and social and environmental impacts. Articles and books were published by several economists, and by politicians, most notably Luis Carlos Galán, who was a senator for the Liberal Party (Forero Báez, Jaramillo de Lozano, and Vélez de Sierra 1985; Galán 1982). One of the country's most respected journalists, Germán Castro Caycedo, made a series of three hour-long reports broadcast on national television in 1982, pointing out the asymmetry in the negotiations between Carbocol and Intercor, and the unfavorable conditions that this had created.[5] State-sponsored educational television offered an opportunity to present the mine in a more positive light and minimize concerns.

According to American sociologist Harvey Kline, negotiating a partnership with the world's largest corporation made Colombian policymakers into "dependent bargainers, who accept the constraints of dependency and TNE participation in energy contracts as givens but employ their political and technical abilities to obtain the best deal they perceive is available to the country" (Kline 1987, 9). This collective notion of the "best deal for the country" was shaped by a shared class bias and attachment to a development model (Kline 1987, 15). The valuation languages attached to such positions were shared by most published critics of the project, who did not question coal extraction as such, but rather the economic terms of the agreement. The distribution of the benefits and harms of extractive projects is shaped by environmental colonialism as an ideological system that is transnational but works "with the consent and participation of national economic elites" (Atiles and Rojas-Páez 2022, 1293). The internal hierarchies of Colombian society and the centralist structure of the state shaped how public media justified the creation of a sacrifice zone and the deterritorialization of

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3 *Hacia la ciencia: El puerto* (dir. Oswaldo Santacruz, Inravisión, ca. 1983 [dated 1990 in catalogue]); *Hacia la ciencia: El futuro del carbón* (dir. Oswaldo Santacruz, Inravisión, ca. 1984). Señal Memoria – RTVC.

4 *Matemática Grado V: La Potenciación* (dir. Mariela Luna de Ortiz, Inravisión, 1985). Señal Memoria – RTVC.

5 The three episodes of Castro Caycedo's program, *Enviado Especial*, first broadcast in October 1982, were available on YouTube at the time of writing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypZWXIz1pDY.

Indigenous communities. This discourse addressed an imagined viewer that was outside La Guajira but within the nation, symbolically appropriating the territory into a hegemonic progress story.

In a natural sciences program, for instance, after discussing the hourly tonnage that can be loaded by the silos, the soundtrack changes from a looped sample of machinery noise to light instrumental synth music.[6] Two shots follow, featuring a woman and a child carrying firewood on their backs, and then a small group of people moving across the arid landscape on donkeys. The voice-over does not identify them as Wayúu or Indigenous, but moves quickly to explain that the project required the "redistribution of the dwellings of many inhabitants of the region," while reassuring the viewer that "an environmental impact study was also carried out." The repetitive, bright music continues over more shots of dump trucks and the claim that "currently, coal constitutes one of the largest export products in Colombia and it generates millions in foreign currency." There is no further mention of the social or environmental impact, or of the Wayúu people and their way of life. It could be argued that this is a "natural sciences" program and social questions would be extraneous. It is nevertheless striking that community displacement and habitat destruction are acknowledged and then minimized in the context of national wealth. After visually contrasting the slow pace of traditional livelihoods (and means of transport) with the dynamism of mining equipment, potential critiques are resolved via technocratic argument, where the environmental impact study is invoked as if its mere existence was a guarantee.

The next program in the series opens with familiar views of draglines and dump trucks, but this is followed by unappealing shots of mud runoff from the mine cuts as they are sprayed with water, and aerial footage of topsoil removal.[7] In a neutral, informative tone, the voice-over explains that the runoff can reach rivers, "causing the destruction of living beings," and that "mineral extraction produces deep modifications in the landscape and affects the habitat of many communities of living beings." The program then cuts to images of artisanal methods of river sand dredging and gold panning, with the implication that these forms of extraction also have an environmental impact and hence are comparable, or rather worse due to the lack of technical expertise. A later social sciences program makes the point more directly, with the presenter introducing a segment about Cerrejón from the entrance to a small deep-pit mine in another part of the country.[8] These miners' explanations of their work, and of the dubious legal status

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6 *Ciencias Naturales Grado V: Riquezas Minerales* (dir. Josefina Granados, Inravisión, 1985). Señal Memoria – RTVC, C1P-243191. Translations here and in the following episodes by author.

7 *Ciencias Naturales Grado V: Los Minerales Recursos No Renovables* (dir. Josefina Granados, Inravisión, 1985). Señal Memoria – RTVC, C1P-243208.

8 *Sociales Grado V: Explotación de Minerales* (dir. Alfonso Rocha, Inravisión, 1985). Señal Memoria – RTVC, C1P-241264.

of their pit, contrast with the polished voice-over and "highly technified" opencast operations. In this case, the contrast between low-tech and advanced infrastructures is used to reinforce the promise of spatial and temporal impact containment.

The visibility of infrastructure across these texts is thus selective, aligned with valuation languages where technification and scale are associated with modernity and mastery, while other types of infrastructures are not even seen as such. The primary grade 5 natural sciences module mentioned above offers another example.[9] The ten-minute segment starts with aerial footage shot from a small plane, surveying the workers' camps, the railway, and the port. These are aestheticized views, saturated with the contrasting colors of the blue Caribbean and the ochre desert soil. While not overtly allied with a military or surveillance gaze or deployed as part of other processes as instrumental or operative images (cf. Amad 2012), these aerial shots are often aligned with an "extractive view," which aims "to render territories and peoples extractible" (Gómez-Barris 2017, 5). The creation of a sacrifice zone, discussed above as a process of colonial deterritorialization, involves a view of the land as *terra nullius*, as a vast emptiness. In this segment, however, the focus is not on vacant wilderness but on its conquest by infrastructure, transformed into spectacle. Shots of landing aircraft showcase the landing strip as new infrastructure made possible by the mine, like the well-ordered new towns, the sharp straight line of the railway, and the piers jutting out into the sea. These aerial views are infrastructural in multiple ways: They sublimate large-scale environmental disruption into visual spectacle, but they also demonstrate what infrastructure enables. Without the new landing strip built for the mine, and the acquisition of light aircraft to service it, the aerial views and the visual pleasure they offer would not have been feasible.

Aerial shots taken from corporate aircraft demonstrate a collaboration between the mine operator and the state broadcaster, which is also evident in the permission to film at ground level within the mine. However, educational television was made on low budgets, and program makers were rarely able to travel to Cerrejón for original footage. Much of the footage was instead borrowed from other programs or newscasts, or provided by Carbocol-Intercor. This includes the appropriation of public relations media pieces, in whole or in parts. The most egregious case is that of a piece produced by Carbocol toward the end of the 1980s, titled "Energy and Heat of Humanity." The piece starts with a history of coal in Colombia using archival footage,[10] followed by a brief institutional history of Carbocol, moving into a

9 *Ciencias Naturales Grado V: Riquezas Minerales* (dir. Josefina Granados, Inravisión, 1985). Señal Memoria – RTVC, C1P-243191.

10 While a closer analysis is required, it is likely that this archival footage would have come from the substantial collections of early Colombian newsreels that had been acquired by Exxon-Intercol's public relations department in 1964 to be used in their own productions. This would signal some collaboration between Exxon's and Carbocol's public relations efforts, which would not be surprising. See Mora Forero 2003, 11–12.

longer focus on Cerrejón. The public broadcasting archives hold at least three educational television programs that recycle this film, with different degrees of reediting.[11] Having been produced for Carbocol as a state enterprise, the material was more easily and cheaply available to public service broadcasters for reuse in further consolidating the unquestioned place of extraction as a fact of national life through education.

The developmentalist narrative that dominates across this corpus deploys languages of valuation that commoditize "natural resources," celebrate mechanization, and privilege macroeconomic indicators. Across these institutional discourses, Indigenous presence in La Guajira is either not mentioned or subject to stereotyped representations. Within the dominant valuation language, the project's impact on Wayúu ways of life can be portrayed only as positive, given that it promotes their integration into markets and institutionality. This reduction of lifeworlds speaks of the untranslatability of valuation languages, where "[c]ommensuration would be an act of power" (Martínez-Alier 2014, 241). The visual tropes of donkey-riding women and colorful weaving help consolidate a superficial view of cultural survival, which could be supported through financial assistance while the conditions for traditional livelihoods were destroyed in the mining process. As Felipe Corral-Montoya, Max Telias, and Nicolas Malz show, executives in Carbocol and Exxon "knew they would most likely bring and [*sic*] end to the way of life that the local Wayúu indigenous people had come to know" (2022, 9) but decided this was an acceptable sacrifice and presented it as such to the rest of the nation.

While state-sponsored broadcasting was organized overtly around the premise of the national interest, Exxon's public relations were more nuanced. Given the much bigger scope of the company, brand image stands above the circumstances of an individual project. This creates spaces for a more varied approach to the representation of the territory and its inhabitants, as discussed in the following section.

Exxon's Public Relations

By the time it signed its coal exploration contract with Carbocol in 1976, Exxon had been deeply involved in oil extraction and retailing in the country for decades, and was able to mobilize its massive public relations apparatus to generate support and policy shifts for the project.[12] Exxon, through its Colombian oil extraction subsidiary Intercol (not to be confused with

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11 These are *La Tierra y el Hombre: Energía y Calor de la Humanidad* (dir. Olivia Velásquez Ulloa, Inravisión, n.d.), C1P-242160; *Avancemos: El carbón* (dir. Beatriz Monte, Inravisión, n.d.), C1P-242054; and a later reedit of the latter program, *Avancemos: El carbón* (dir. Beatriz Monte, Inravisión, 1991), C1P-244119-3. What seems to be the original piece is *Carbones de Colombia S.A.* (Ministry of Mines and Energy/ Video Móvil, 1992), but note the disparity in dates, which suggests that this was a new broadcast of content made and distributed earlier.

12 Work on Exxon's public relations has focused on its global oil business. See Dahlquist 2021; Ferguson-DeThorne 1978; Supran and Oreskes 2017. Exxon's public relations campaigns included a concerted effort to amplify uncertainty in climate change research and minimize the contribution of fossil fuels to the climate crisis. See https://exxonknew.org/.

Intercor, which was the coal-focused subsidiary created for the Cerrejón project), had occupied a salient place in Colombian cultural life since the 1940s. Maria Zazzarino (2022) has traced a similar history in Venezuela, where Standard Oil's subsidiary, Creole, used their extensive public relations apparatus to present themselves "not only as the harbinger of economic development but also as a promoter of Venezuela's cultural expressions," in the interest of both "enchanting" and naturalizing oil extraction by a foreign corporation. In Colombia, Intercol financed countless cultural initiatives, from literary awards to film restoration to modern art exhibitions. It backed the foundation of the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá and was so central to the sector that the critic Marta Traba spoke of "Intercol culture" (Reyes 2019, 15–16).

A key component of Exxon's public relations was its cultural magazine, *Lámpara*. This was one of the twenty-one local versions of *The Lamp*, Esso's prestigious public relations and shareholder magazine (Ferguson-DeThorne 1978). The Colombian version retained the same layout and graphic style as the US one, as well as publishing some of the original articles in translation. However, most of the content was commissioned from Colombian writers, photographers, scholars, and artists, giving the publication a central role as a cultural sponsor. According to Christian Javier Padilla Peñuela, *Lámpara* was "[t]he most significative intellectual vehicle of cohesion between Colombia and the United States' Pan American project" (2018, abstract). This is consistent with Zazzarino's analysis of *Lámpara*'s equivalent in Venezuela, *El Farol*, which hired prominent artists and experts as part of "an intentional effort to present the oil industry as a domestic rather than a foreign presence," seeking "to naturalize oil and as a performance of territorial management" (2022). Zazzarino describes the magazine's efforts to "enchant" oil as "a performance of territorial management that sought to hypervisibilize its processes while invisibilizing others," visually and rhetorically evacuating local populations. In *Lámpara*'s treatment of Colombian coal, there is a similar play of visibility. However, this comes at a time in the 1980s of greater public relations sensitivity around environmental impact and Indigenous communities. Exxon's public-facing "territorial management" for Cerrejón thus proceeds through compartmentalization, not just in space but in time. This can be seen in the many lavishly illustrated articles about Cerrejón and about coal's role in a new energy landscape published during the initial years of the project, and in a prestige short film produced in 1988.

The first substantial article that *Lámpara* publishes about Cerrejón, just after the signing of Exxon's exploitation deal with the Colombian government, is dominated by diagrams explaining the distribution of payments as a way to promise "great advantages for a large region which has traditionally been left behind in national development," and highlighting the importance for Colombia of capturing foreign currency in order to pay for growing oil

imports.[13] This sought to preempt the political debates that raged around this agreement. By 1982, these discussions had started questioning not just the economic basis of the project but also its environmental impact. The next substantive *Lámpara* article was a response to these concerns, referring extensively to the environmental impact assessment conducted by one of the country's leading engineering and consulting firms, Integral. This article was illustrated in an abstract fashion by Daniel Castro, a young protégé of Beatriz González who worked under her at the Intercol-supported Museum of Modern Art (Bautista 2020). The rhythmic watercolor illustrations are somewhat beach-themed and elide any relationship to coal mining. The article acknowledges that "any industrial project impacts the environment; what matters is that, as in this case, the impact is evaluated before it is produced, so that it can be avoided, reduced, compensated or controlled."[14] This same rhetoric of applied research and impact containment is reproduced in relation to Indigenous communities living in the mining area. In contrast to the developmental and assimilationist emphasis of national media, Exxon proposes a compartmentalization, where Indigenous lives are represented as if they can be insulated from the mine and its impacts.

Lámpara ran a feature about Cerrejón in each of the five issues between the construction of the port in 1984 and the first coal shipment in 1985, plus other ethnographic and historical articles on the La Guajira region and its Wayúu inhabitants. The five features are amply illustrated with color photography. Across these five articles, there are fifty-seven photographs, of which more than half are of the port and railway. Images of the mine itself are relatively scarce, and there is a greater focus on machines and economic graphs than on workers or inhabitants. This is particularly the case in the work of photographer Guillermo Molano, who illustrated three of the articles. Very sharp and tightly framed, these color images single out infrastructural objects against the open skies of La Guajira. Aerial photography is used to showcase the port and the railway, supplemented with schematic maps. This is a view of the territory focused on its connective points, inserting La Guajira into the global market through the railway-port infrastructure but also through the importation of machinery and technology. Some striking geometric compositions use the steel frames being erected and the long diagonals of railways and roads to dissect the desert landscape. In these photographs, human presence is minimal, with workers silhouetted among the giant machines. While the workforce is obscured and anonymous, the machines are individualized, with heroic low-angle portraits of the locomotive and romantic sunset images of loading machines. This pattern of abstraction is a key spatializing dynamic in the visual and rhetorical

13 "Un proyecto para pensar en grande," *Lámpara* 17, no. 80 (1980). Illustrated by Felipe Valencia and Gustavo Rey.

14 "El carbón de El Cerrejón mantendrá la ecología guajira," *Lámpara* 20, no. 87 (1982). Illustrated by Daniel Castro.

Figure 1: "A Guajiran woman visits the workers." Photo by Guillermo Molano, *Lámpara*, no. 96 (1985).

entrenchment of the project. Addressing Colombian urban elites, the clean imagery aestheticizes the mining process and focuses on its technologically impressive feats of engineering and commerce, rather than on the more mundane and dirty process of digging a big hole in the ground.

Alongside these celebrations of modernity and global trade, *Lámpara* also published several ethnographic articles about the Wayúu (none about other local inhabitants also affected by the mine, particularly Afro-Colombian and campesino populations). These pieces appeal to a liberal interest in Indigenous communities, who are not addressed as potential readers of the magazine, nor are they commissioned to write or create visual material for it. One of Molano's photographs shows a woman described as "Guajiran" and dressed in a flowing robe as used by many Wayúu women, with a child, talking to two construction workers by the side of the railway (figure 1). The image captures the gendered rendition of the territory as passive and childlike, looking on as the masculine work of infrastructure goes ahead.

The pattern set out by *Lámpara* is expressed in a sophisticated and attractive way in a 1988 short documentary commissioned by Exxon, titled simply *El Cerrejón* (*The Little Mountain*) (Wolf 1988).[15] The film was made by a US crew, and it is narrated in English. It seems to be addressed primarily to shareholders and to company employees in the United States, though it would also have circulated in broader nontheatrical circuits such as schools

15 At the time of writing, a version of the film was available on the cinematographer Barry Braverman's YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH60O2YGWu4.

and embassies. It is thus a late follower in the tradition of the prestige "petrofilm" pioneered by Shell, which embodied a corporation's brand values while impressing customers and shareholders (Damluji 2015). It positions Exxon as a responsible and thoughtful corporation with a moral humanistic dimension. This is centered here on ethnographic images of the Wayúu Indigenous communities doing everyday activities such as fishing, goat herding, and drying sea salt. Perhaps unexpectedly, the film claims that "the Wayúu believe their ancestral home is the source of their strength and dignity" and thus "to succeed in the Guajira, industry must recognize the land as a sacred trust, and the Wayúu as its natural heirs and masters." This is the only document I have found across the public and private sponsored media consulted where the Wayúu right to the land is mentioned, even though it is couched in the ethnographic language of the "sacred" or "god-given" land. This is an ineffective gesture, in any case, as the rest of the film does not question the project's intervention.

The film proceeds through visual parallels between the Wayúu way of life and the technological acceleration of the mine. Artisanal fishermen cast their nets while a coal cargo ship comes into port. A goatherd sets out with her animals while the morning shift mine workers climb into their dump trucks. Mechanics attend to glistening engines while a girl grinds corn in a metal hand mill. While the parallel editing suggests that these things are happening simultaneously in different places, the narration sets out a narrative of cultural encounter that presents two incommensurable worlds that exist in different temporalities. The Wayúu day is placed in a timeless loop, opposed to the linear trajectory of the mine as a bounded project. The Wayúu and the mine or its workers are never brought together within the frame in the shorter version of the film. A longer version, preserved in the Exxon collection at Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano, adds a section about the company's social responsibility programs, where this encounter is again restricted to the presence of the mobile medical unit and the Yanama community assistance organization.

As the magazine offered back-to-back articles about mine construction and anthropological research, the film brings both strands together and develops its central argument through montage. Particularly in its shorter version, it can be read as an ethnographic documentary about cultural encounter or as an infrastructural process spectacle, enjoyed for the outstanding quality of its cinematography and its pleasing musical background. The "two worlds" structure allows it to have its cake and eat it too. Concluding that the Wayúu "do what they must to keep their way of life intact," the film acknowledges the threat of ethnocide but shifts responsibility to the Wayúu themselves, while the massive industrial operation unfolds as if an inevitable force of nature.

Having provided this overview of representational strategies across a range of sponsored media, I return, in the next section, to some of the earlier material to outline their promises of temporal and spatial containment, and how they both acknowledge and disavow the consequences of extraction.

Containment and Temporalities

Corporate communications around Cerrejón do not deny that the project will transform the landscape. Indeed, the technological conquest of nature by literally moving mountains with giant machines is transformed into visual spectacle. This spectacle is predicated on a colonial relationship to the land, which is assumed to be shared by the viewer, and which in turn enables the neocolonial practices of multinational corporations. The sacrifice zones created by extractivism are, as Marcelo Lopes de Souza argues, "multi-scalar" (2021). The specific area that will be dug out, blown up, or covered in detritus is located in a region constructed as peripheral, which is, in turn, articulated with a global hierarchy of primary producers and consumers and subject to a "morphology of destruction" (Fox 2016). Aerial cinematography provided a way to reinforce the terms of the sacrificial bargain. While La Guajira has a wide diversity of ecosystems, Cerrejón films and photographs presented views of flat, arid expanses. From the air, and for audiences who were not familiar with such environments, this looked like desert and scrub, low-value land compared to the agricultural pattern of the Andean region. Furthermore, the Indigenous, Afro-Caribbean, and campesino inhabitants of La Guajira used the land in ways that held little monetary value and were poorly understood by government decisionmakers and filmmakers alike. In consequence, several of the visual strategies discussed before have a deterritorializing effect. In this way of perceiving the world, the state's (and the corporation's) access to Indigenous lands is taken for granted.[16]

Once symbolically and physically evacuated and devalued through colonial deterritorialization, places can be figured as sacrifice zones for an expected greater good. The logic of sacrifice zones sustains the illusion that social and environmental impacts from large-scale extractive industries can be contained within a set boundary. The illusion of containment is a key component of the environmental and social responsibility narratives presented in these films. These containment claims are constructed along spatial and temporal dimensions, often reflecting a regulatory system that can account only for short-term effects and is affected by shifting baselines.

The conventions of the process genre (Skvirsky 2020) are useful to make the process of extraction appear controlled and measurable. For instance, the natural sciences class on nonrenewable resources explains how the topsoil and the overburden are removed and stored "respecting the order of geological

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16 As Max Liboiron argues, colonialism is "about genocide and access" (Liboiron 2021, 8).

layers" so that they can be put back and reforested.[17] Aerial views present neat squares of land where the coal or the rock is piled up, housing units arranged in precise grids, and tailings ponds that are supposed to prevent the leaching of harmful minerals into the rivers. Other forms of pollution are similarly disavowed by foregrounding of mitigation measures, such as spraying water to keep dust from rising. Despite these claims, evidence from the last three decades shows that coal dust and water contamination have affected communities beyond the immediate surroundings of the mine and along the railway (García Velandia et al. 2016, 33). Perhaps the largest externality, however, comes from the burning of the coal. This has happened thousands of miles away, mostly in Europe or the United States, while the consequences have been felt by the most exposed populations around the world. Pollution, as "an enactment of colonial relations to Land" (Liboiron 2021, 7), is meant to be absorbed by the sacrifice zone. However, it instead grows this zone, extending its reach across the world along lines of historical oppression. Climate change belies the fantasy of spatial containment.

Alongside this presumed geographical separation, a sacrifice zone may also be defined in time. The exploitation agreement set out a spatial boundary (one that has been changed and extended following the coal seam), but also a temporal one: Intercor had the right to extract and market the coal for twenty-three years (until 2003). This sense of time-limited activity is articulated very explicitly at the end of *El Cerrejón* (*The Little Mountain*), which concludes its narrative of encounter by promising a later separation: "the two cultures have met, and they will continue to meet, until the coal is gone and each people again go their separate ways." This is a fitting conclusion to a film that seeks to present the mining project and the Wayúu lifeworld as existing on different temporal planes. The ethnographic gaze positions the Wayúu as being outside history, and therefore disperses the real possibility of their disappearance. If they have always been there, in a god-given land, then a short-term intervention poses little risk to their survival. They intersect only momentarily the linear path of progress. This version of an encounter without consequences on either side is another fantasy of containment.

Finally, institutional and sponsored image-making negotiated the "shifting social temporalities" of infrastructure (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018, 6), where its longevity was imagined as a benefit to the nation.[18] Across the examples examined, the port and the railway occupy more screen time than the mining operation. The harbor not only provides aesthetically pleasing

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17 *Ciencias Naturales Grado V: Los Minerales Recursos No Renovables* (dir. Josefina Granados, Inravisión, 1985). Señal Memoria – RTVC, C1P-243208.

18 Some of the early critiques of the project, such as the Castro-Caycedo investigative report, argued that the long-term promises of the exploitation agreement, such as the provision of a new port, railway line, and housing, were not being served by the short-term approach of the constructor and operator.

footage in intense color but also represents the international market and the promise of a "healthy" balance of trade. The spectacle of port and railway is that of the logistical sublime, as discussed by Charmaine Chua (2015) and Kyle Stine (2021): a fantasy of frictionless trade, a continuous flow of coal, accelerating each year until the seam runs out. There is a tension between the avowed temporal limitation of extractive projects and the open-ended life of infrastructure, which becomes another form of "temporal enclosure" (Jaramillo and Carmona 2022). Looming on the horizon beyond the Wayúu's sacred hill Jepira, the piers of Puerto Bolívar still assert their permanence, even as wind turbines have appeared around them in recent years.

Conclusion

From its inception, the Cerrejón North Block project produced environmental distribution conflicts, where media have had a role in communicating the valuation languages used by different actors. Controversies over the Carbocol-Intercor deal pushed the state to defend the political legitimacy of large-scale mining and the necessity of transnational capital. While Carbocol did not have a public relations apparatus, institutional discourses could circulate on public service media by being framed as educational content. They addressed the audience as citizens who would ultimately benefit from an expensive, technologically advanced project that was in the national interest. However, in a centralist state built around racist and colonial exclusions, "the nation" is a contested collective. By claiming a previously marginalized region as a resource required to fix the balance of trade, hegemonic interests commoditized the land. In the coal-centered optics of educational television, land was now a surface surveyed from the air or an inconvenient layer covering a measurable, valuable amount of mineral, rather than a riverbed, a holy mountain, a seasonal grazing pasture, or a subsistence croft. Its inhabitants became either potential workers or recipients of aid, their "development" defined by insertion into dependency.

As Corral-Montoya et al. argue, Cerrejón demonstrates how the entrenchment of fossil fuel extraction was the consequence of the gradual buildup of "asymmetric dependency relationships" between companies, communities, and the government (2022, 13). These relationships were encouraged by the most powerful actors, particularly fossil fuel incumbents that typically capture or co-opt state institutions. While these forms of power become tangible as economic and political hegemony, they are also sustained by cultural and discursive constructions as part of the policy process. Exxon had a powerful and sophisticated public relations system to help secure the support of Colombian elite sectors, while also maintaining the kind of prestige and respectability that has helped fossil fuel companies to avoid scrutiny. Their discourses had started to deploy the languages of care, responsibility, and sustainability that Jaramillo and Carmona observe later (2022). This is achieved through promises of spatial and temporal

containment that can be traced in the visual and narrative strategies used in their published materials. The proposed bargain of opencast coal is that the environmental impact will be localized in a sacrifice zone, and that it will be temporary, resulting in an improved, restored landscape. The social benefits touted by public relations materials (assistance programs, training, enterprise creation, and so on), however, are also bound by contractual horizons and eventually discontinued, often when a return to the pre-extraction status quo is no longer possible. Once a river has been diverted or polluted by the mine, what happens when the contractor stops sending out the water tanker? The temporal containment of impacts is thus as illusory as their spatial boundedness.

Time-based audiovisual media in corporate communications help produce the compartmentalization of impacts and the legitimation of extractive valuation languages. Visual spectacle and abstraction serve to deterritorialize the land and to justify the bargain of the extractive zone. In a case like Cerrejón, the films layer on top of each other the linear time of progress or development favored by the modernizing state; the short-term temporality of the corporate project, with a predictable timetable for the return of investment; and the presumed timelessness or circularity of Indigenous life. By separating these timelines through the rhythms of editing and soundtrack, films can sustain the illusion that the interactions between these temporalities can, in fact, be controlled and contained.

Of course, the trade-off promised in the sacrifice zone deal is never fair. Fossil fuel extraction makes sense as a business only if a large portion of its real costs are externalized (e.g., to the state; see Knöpfel 2020). Early critics of the project pointed out one obvious inequity in the Carbocol-Intercor deal: it did not take into account the fact that Colombia was contributing all of the coal (Galán 1982, 77). Externalizing the cost of the coal, as if it did not exist before it was extracted, was one way in which Exxon could increase its profits. More pertinently, the environmental and social cost of extraction has been paid and will continue to be paid acutely by the people of La Guajira, and more diffusedly by every living system threatened by climate change, in the complex web of "embodied energy injustices" across boundaries (Healy, Stephens, and Malin 2019). The instrumental discourses of corporate and institutional media are often taken for granted, and indeed there are few surprises in the materials studied here. However, critical engagement with the symbolic strategies of extractivism reveals the sorts of patterns and nuances that have woven these injustices and that will need to be unraveled.

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Banner Image: "Metallic structure for the coal handling station" (translation of the original caption). Photo by Guillermo Molano, *Lámpara*, no. 94 (1984).

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