

The Cinema in the Life of García Márquez

The Early Years: *La langosta azul* and Neorealism

As all readers of Gabriel García Márquez know, the cinema plays an integral part in virtually all his novels and short stories, making its mark on the reality he represents. The most celebrated example is probably the passage in *Cien años de soledad* in which the inhabitants of Macondo are up in arms. They decide not to go to the cinema any more to see the films that arrive in the village, because they refuse to accept that ‘the character who had died and was buried in one film and for whose misfortune tears of affliction had been shed would reappear alive and transformed into an Arab in the next one’.¹ One could cite any number of examples, for the simple reason that the cinema was a fundamental experience for García Márquez from childhood. As the author relates in his autobiography, his grandfather Colonel Nicolás Márquez was responsible for revealing to him not only the temperature of ice – as in the famous opening of *Cien años de soledad* – but also, and above all, the new wonder of the century, the cinema. In fact, ‘each time he thought the film appropriate’, the Italian owner of the cinema in Aracataca, Don Antonio Daconte, ‘would invite us to the early show at the Olympia’, to the shocked disapproval of Gabriel’s grandmother.²

As Gerald Martin, the authorised biographer of García Márquez, points out, in considering his relationship with the cinema it is important to bear in mind that ‘he was, of course, a member of the first generation in history for whom the cinema, including talking films, was an experience prior to written literature’.³ Films were García Márquez’s first experience of narrative, preceding both reading and writing, all the more so because, after each film, his grandfather would get him to retell in his own words the story they had just seen together.⁴

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 223.

² Gabriel García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale* (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 87.

³ Gerald Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 54.

⁴ Martin, *García Márquez: A Life*, pp. 53–4.

But if this childhood experience laid the foundations for García Márquez's knowledge and love of the cinema, there was another experience that was no less crucial during his youth. García Márquez would usually name the filmmaker and writer Alvaro Cepeda Samudio as his first, decisive tutor about the world of the cinema and its importance as an artistic and cultural phenomenon:

For me cinema was merely a source of enjoyment. [...] Then Alvaro came along with the crazy idea that the true culture in the 20th century was cinema; and so there we were, constantly in one or other of the cinemas in Barranquilla, stupendous places with no roofs, so that you saw films beneath the stars and the full moon. I had developed such an interest in the cinema that when I went to work on the daily newspaper *El Espectador*, I managed to get them to assign me to write film reviews.⁵

Thus, having been a devoted spectator as a child, García Márquez began to take the cinema seriously thanks to the guidance of his intellectual friendships in El Grupo de Barranquilla, and in particular Alvaro Cepeda. The upshot of this early artistic interest in the cinema was his participation in the film *La langosta azul* (1954) and his critical reflection on and popularisation of the cinema in the reviews and articles he wrote between February 1954 and July 1955 for the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador*. There are also some significant writings dating from prior to this period, notably his review of Vittorio De Sica's film *Ladri di Biciclette*, published in the Barranquilla newspaper *El Heraldito* on 16 October 1950.⁶

La langosta azul was an independent, amateur production undertaken by the group of intellectuals, including García Márquez, known as El Grupo de Barranquilla. The shooting took place over five days in a location on Colombia's Atlantic coast, with a 16 mm camera in black-and-white and with no audio. The people involved in the shooting were Alvaro Cepeda Samudio, Luis Vicens and his wife, Nancy, Enrique Grau, Roberto Prieto, Cecilia Porras and Nereo López.

It is not easy to say who was really responsible for the film's conception and screenplay, or how large a contribution was made by each person, or indeed by García Márquez. According to the respected French critic Jacques Gilard,⁷ the

⁵ Ives Billon, and Mauricio Cavard Martínez, *La escritura embrujada*. Colombia, Les films de Village, 1999. [My translation: except where otherwise indicated, all translations are my own]

⁶ This is what he had to say in *Vivir para contarla*, emphasising again the two fundamental learning experiences: 'A very different kind of reality forced me to be a movie critic. It had never occurred to me that I could be one, but in Don Antonio Daconte's Olympia Theater in Aracataca, and then in the traveling school of Alvaro Cepeda, I had glimpsed the basic elements for writing a guide to films using a more helpful criterion than the one known until then in Colombia.' García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*, p. 436.

⁷ Gabriel García Márquez, *Entre cachacos*, I. *Obra periodística*, vol. 2, ed. Jacques Gilard, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1982), pp. 26–7.

author was not really involved at all, and this seems to be borne out by his own recollections in *Vivir para contarla*, where he attributes the original idea for the film to Alvaro Cepeda, adding that ‘everyone did a little of everything, but the papá by right was Luis Vicens’. He also states that, while the film was being shot in Barranquilla, he was elsewhere working on a journalistic assignment. Nonetheless, he did claim to have added ‘something that I do not recall today’ to the screenplay, and spoke of the film as ‘amusing, and it had a large enough dose of lunacy to make it seem like ours [...] It is an elementary work whose great merit seems to be its command of intuition.’⁸

So, even if only minimally, García Márquez did recall collaborating on the screenplay. The photographer Nereo López, who was present during the shooting, is on record as saying that ‘the story was Alvaro Cepeda’s, who wanted to make a film of it’, but that García Márquez was involved ‘not so much in the screenplay as in the structure of the narration’.⁹ Others who have written about this experience mention other details: for example, how Alvaro Cepeda Samudio ‘had long been planning to film a short story by García Márquez [...] which, following a series of synopses, he decided to call *La langosta azul*’.¹⁰ And again:

Cepeda Samudio’s widow Teresa de Cepeda suggests that García Márquez washed his hands of the film because his original idea had been completely rewritten [...] Since Cepeda Samudio was the only member of this group to continue as a film maker, he is often credited as the director; yet Enrique Grau recounts that this was above all a group project and all decisions were made by consensus.¹¹

It is also said that the film was edited by Vicens in Bogotá in 1955 and that García Márquez was present.¹² Gerald Martin states that, although he was in Bogotá in the period of the film’s shooting at Barranquilla, García Márquez often went to join his group of friends on the coast.¹³ In effect he implies that, however difficult it is to establish the extent of García Márquez’s involvement in the film, it seems impossible that he played no part. Endorsing this position,

⁸ García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*, p. 458.

⁹ Nereo López Meza, ‘La langosta azul: Nereo López recuerda’, *Nuevo Texto Crítico*, 11:21–22 (1998), 341.

¹⁰ Jairo Buitrago, ‘Españoles en el cine colombiano’, *Cuadernos de cine colombiano*, 7 (2005), 43.

¹¹ Paul Lenti, ‘La langosta azul’, in Timothy Barnard and Peter Rist (eds), *South American Cinema: A Critical Filmography, 1915–1994* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p. 245.

¹² Dasso Saldívar, *García Márquez: viaje a la semilla* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997), p. 419.

¹³ ‘Certainly the fact that he would appear in the credits for a film which Alvaro Cepeda would shortly direct, a short experimental movie entitled *The Blue Lobster*, suggests that his visits to the Costa were reasonably frequent.’ Martin, *García Márquez: A Life*, p. 168.

we believe that a consideration of *La langosta azul* reveals elements of filmic culture, poetics and narrative aesthetic that are very close to García Márquez's artistic and literary formation.

In general, critics have classified the film as an experimental and surrealist work.¹⁴ Some commentators identify it as a crucial stage in the evolution of cinematographic language in Colombia.¹⁵ At a more analytical level, commentators have emphasised the fusion or alternation it displays between the storyline, typical of fiction, and a documentary vocation which tends to represent everyday life while at the same time creating a peculiar atmosphere rich in the poetic and symbolic elements associated with surrealism.

It is true that the film is constructed using a classical narrative framework, with a presentation and a turning point that sparks off the narrative development, based on a quest, and a resolution that brings the story to an end.¹⁶ The narrative thread is never lost sight of, even if at some moments the narration appears to become quite rarefied, diluted in the vision of the environment as a whole or of its poetic and symbolic representation. Some synopses of the film appear to ignore this – for instance, when they present the first part of the structure but then assign the rest to the category of press coverage:

A foreign agent called 'El gringo' is investigating the presence of radioactivity in some lobsters caught in a fishing village in the Caribbean. While he is resting in his hotel room a cat makes off with the lobster. Seized by remorse and anxiety, 'El gringo' goes out to look for it in the streets. While this is going on, the camera goes about making and presenting a visual account of the surroundings.¹⁷

The visual account, part of the original conception of the film, is delivered as part of the narrative guiding the spectator. The combination of journalism and literature that characterised García Márquez's upbringing and his writing is undoubtedly recognisable here as the cultural basis for the conception of *La langosta azul*.

¹⁴ See: Camilo Tamayo, 'Hacia una arqueología de nuestra imagen: cine y modernidad en Colombia (1900–1960)', *Signo y Pensamiento*, XXV:048 (2006), 52; Diego León Giraldo, 'La increíble y triste historia de GGM y de la cinematografía desalmada', in *El cine como testimonio* (Bogotá: Cordillera, 1991), p. 70; Lenti, 'La langosta azul', p. 245; Mauricio Laurens, 'Factores sociales en el desarrollo del cine nacional', *Comunicación y Ciudadanía*, 1 (2009), 109; Jorge Nieto, 'Otros extranjeros', *Cuadernos de cine colombiano*, 7 (2005), 52.

¹⁵ Hernando Martínez Pardo, 'José María Arzuaga', *Cuadernos de cine colombiano*, 8 (2006), 23-4, 37; Hernando Martínez Pardo, *Historia del cine colombiano* (Bogotá: Editorial América Latina, 1978), in Lenti, 'La langosta azul', p. 246.

¹⁶ The names are also an indication of character: El gringo (the foreigner), El hotelero (the hotel owner), El brujo (the sorcerer), La hembra (the woman), El vivo (the scamp), El pelao del Barrilete (the kid with the kite).

¹⁷ *La langosta azul (Ficha técnica)*. Fundación Patrimonio Filmico Colombiano. Web. 14 February 2012; Fundación Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano. Web. 14 February 2012.

At the same time, however, the narrative rationale underpinning the journalistic report changes in the course of the story. One can identify a first part, based on a surrealist approach, in which ‘El gringo’ is exploring the town looking for the lost lobster, and a second part, in which all the townspeople take part in the search. Now the focus switches to a new character, ‘El vivo’, introducing an episode in which narrative and documentary are closely entwined. Finally, the resolution is characterised by a lyrical and poetic vein in which the protagonist is the child, known as ‘El pelao del barrilete’, who quite by chance finds the lobster everyone is after. Interestingly, although the first part of the film features a few surrealist elements, it scrupulously reflects every slight gesture of the protagonist in a way that evokes the narrative and dramatic modalities to which García Márquez was then drawing attention in his reviews of *Umberto D.* or *Germania anno zero*, where the drama is divided up into infinitely small segments and the action is represented in a multitude of minuscule gestures and actions.

The quest for the lobster begins when the foreigner leaves his hotel and walks down an avenue lined with the typical local dwellings. In the courtyard of the first one he goes into, ‘El gringo’ comes across a man shaving with the aid of a mirror hung on a wooden post, who cuts himself.¹⁸ Then, after looking into a house where a woman is frying fish and laughs, putting her hand to her mouth, ‘El gringo’ meets ‘La hembra’, who takes him into a shed where ‘El brujo’ begins a magic ritual to find the lobster. This episode combines an air of mystery – the woman and the sorcerer are intent on enabling the man to find the lobster by magic – and a certain irony, since the ritual ends with a chicken materialising instead of the lobster, to the foreigner’s exasperation.

Apart from the lack of any coherence or logical connection between the three moments (the man shaving, the woman frying fish and the magic ritual), we can recognise here the ‘typically surrealist’ procedure of the enhanced significance of objects and details that recur repeatedly, such as the razor, the fish or the slight pelvic thrust of the woman’s body during the ritual.¹⁹ This, together with the fact that the action is apparently casual and gratuitous, seems to collocate the images and actions on a symbolic, poetic or surrealist plane. Furthermore, the sorcerer’s ritual brings in further magic–symbolic elements, accompanied by a register like that of an ethnographic documentary but underscored by the ironic tone that characterises the whole film. In fact, vexed by the disappointing outcome of the ritual, ‘El gringo’ gives up his quest, and the focus moves to children at the sea-

¹⁸ It is striking that the exploration begins with this recurrent image in García Márquez’s fiction, for which in his autobiography he provided a sort of original source: ‘In the morning, when we were already at the dock in Ciénaga, my grandfather stood shaving with his straight razor, the door open and the mirror hanging from the frame.’ García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Gabriel Alba Gutiérrez et al., *Historias y argumentos: cincuenta años de hibridación narrativa en el cine colombiano* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005), p. 32.

side: some arrive in a small boat, others are playing with kites and then start throwing stones into the sea. A child who has seen the foreigner in town tells the others of his plight, and all of them – bar one – run to spread word of the lobster. This is how the news reaches ‘El vivo’, a young rascal who we first see as he helps himself to a drink at the expense of two customers in the local tavern. Hearing of the foreigner’s interest in lobsters, ‘El vivo’ cadges a ride in the boat belonging to a family of fishermen and loads his bag with lobsters. This is one of the parts in which the narration most clearly becomes rarefied, with a series of documentary-type shots, beautiful and poetic, showing aspects of the local fishermen’s reality. This interlude prepares the youth’s exploit, as he arrives in ‘El gringo’s room and empties all the lobsters he has procured onto the floor. Even though it takes only a matter of seconds for the foreigner to discard them all, the youth nonetheless gets something for his efforts: the woman stretched out on the bed, since ‘El gringo’ goes out without giving her another thought, once again hot on the trail of the blue lobster. At this very moment, down by the sea, the child who had remained playing by himself finds it and ties it to the tail of his kite so that it flies up into the air. By chance the man has gone to the very spot where the child is playing (and the episode is characterised by a crescendo in rhythm, cutting from images of the child to the man walking towards him), and finally sees the lobster in mid-air, but in his attempt to snatch the kite from the child he makes it fly away. The camera shows the lobster disappearing over the horizon and the child and the foreigner, their backs turned, watching it go. Then they in turn are seen through the field glasses which throughout the film have repeatedly provided the viewpoint for the framing (characterised by a circular template), referring to a mysterious character, introduced at the beginning, who follows everything that happens through his binoculars.

In fact, the film has a classic narrative structure – presentation, development, resolution – but with an evident underlying irony, visible right from the outset in the type of situation that gives rise to the action: a blue lobster, radioactive experiments, the man’s excessive wariness contrasted with the cat stealing the lobster out of sheer playfulness. In addition to the strangeness of the situation, enhanced by the mysterious penchant of the owner of the Tal Hotel for blowing up balloons only to let them down again, we can note that this strangeness gradually spreads, affecting the town and the whole environment, provoking a new animation which itself becomes the subject of the story. Thus, if the film does indeed manifest a documentary-style approach to reality – highlighted as a new feature in the context of Colombian cinema at this time²⁰ – it also has to be recognised that this derives

²⁰ It is significant that Colombian critics have seen in *La langosta azul* an example of spatial construction and a ‘context which fleshes out and gives sense to the characters’ (Martínez Pardo, ‘José María Arzuaga’, 37), while Gilard, speaking of the influence of neorealism on García Márquez at this time, pointed to his discovery of the importance of ‘background’ and the necessity of ‘treating characters and context as a single whole’ (García Márquez, *Entre cachacos*, pp. 48–9).

from the conception of a new, extraordinary fact that claims everybody's attention and gives rise in turn to other actions and manifestations, such as the magic ritual of 'El brujo' and 'La hembra', the episode of 'El vivo' and the poetry of the kites and the flying lobster engendered by 'El pelao'.

All this seems to add up to a narrative model that anticipates the structure of a famous short story by García Márquez, 'Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes'. The setting is very similar, just as the mechanism is analogous to that of *La langosta azul*, with the sudden appearance in a town of an extraordinary creature that becomes the centre of attention, until the day it disappears just as mysteriously as it had come. In particular, it is striking that the final image of the film features the poetical flight of the lobster disappearing over the horizon, while the presence of the characters watching it go highlights the fact that, by the same token, the spectator is losing any possibility of knowing what the newcomer was supposed to do with it or what had brought him there. The situation is similar to the finale in the short story, where the old winged man flies away, disappearing over the horizon and observed by one of the characters, leaving the mystery of his origins and identity unresolved. The role of the child in the film also seems important, since he manages, all on his own, not only to find the lobster but also to engender a sort of creative and poetic act, making it fly by tying it to the tail of his kite. In the short story, where it is the old winged man who is the 'magician' capable of creative and poetic acts, the child is a sort of secret apprentice to him.

Then there is another short story by García Márquez that can be associated with *La langosta azul*, namely 'En este pueblo no hay ladrones'. The protagonist of this story is not unlike 'El vivo', always on the lookout for some cunning scheme to enable him to make ends meet. Here too the ironic approach to the character contributes to García Márquez's subtle way of going beyond the rationale and poetics of narrative realism.

To conclude, in view of the exchanges and circulation of ideas and experiences among the friends of El Grupo de Barranquilla, the singular cinematographic experience of *La langosta azul* features a series of interesting and significant aspects in relation to the development of a new aesthetic and narrative model that undoubtedly also involved García Márquez. In particular, there is a clear attempt to renew the capacity of art and writing to rediscover and reinvent immediate reality and its representation. And in cultural terms, one can recognise the playfully experimental attempt to elaborate a new aesthetic in which various elements of contemporary culture – including cinema, surrealism and journalism – enter into a completely new relationship with Colombian reality in such a way as to transform its perception and representation. All these elements certainly played their part in the formation and expressive resources of García Márquez, among others.

Meanwhile, during the period in which his friends were at work on this film, García Márquez was busy writing reviews of what the cinemas of Bogotá were