

Film Review

- *A las puertas del infierno: niños rotos (At the Gates of Hell: Broken Children)*, directed by Miguel Toral. Spain, 2017.

In 2018, more than 4,000 adolescents entered the Juvenile Justice System in Colombia. In the same year more than 18,000 juvenile delinquency cases were reported to the Colombian police, while more than 8,000 Colombian minors came in conflict with the law and were prosecuted through the Juvenile Justice System (more than 3,000 of them are currently still in prison). The documentary *At the Gates of Hell: Broken Children*, directed by Spanish filmmaker Miguel Toral, shows the harsh reality of, what he calls, “broken children”, Colombian urban youngsters resorting to criminal and violent acts. Toral focuses mainly on such youngsters in two of the most notorious neighbourhoods in Colombia: Ciudad Bolívar and Comuna 13. Ciudad Bolívar is a poor neighbourhood in the south of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, that is known for its rampant levels of violence due to mafia, guerrilla and gang activities,¹¹ Comuna 13 is a critical neighbourhood in the west of Medellín with high levels of civil conflict that is often the scene of drug, guerrilla and paramilitary violence that made it the most dangerous neighbourhood in Medellín.²²

Chronicling the experiences of youngsters in these two neighbourhoods and told in their own words, this documentary shows how “broken children” are torn between being perpetrator and victim at the same time. They try to meet their most basic needs through crime, which they consider as the only way to survive the violent world they live in. Through a series of interviews with some of the young hitmen and some of the young prostitute women as well as experts and community leaders, the film shows that Colombia, the fourth country with the most child deaths in the world, has such a high mortality rate among youngsters due to phenomena such as teenage pregnancy, prostitution, contract killing, and the distribution and consumption of illicit drugs.

In *At the Gates of Hell*, this harsh urban reality is exposed in a visceral way through the voices from the protagonists whose childhood is interrupted by the vulnerability condition in which they find themselves, the lack of support from governmental unites, and the influence exerted by adults who are often part of

organizations operating outside the law. The film was filmed mostly in open spaces such as parks, rooftops, open doors at the Comuna 13 and small groceries. The aerial drone shots provide a broad (over)view of the way in which the communities are constituted, revealing information about the economic, social and political situation in which the characters find themselves. The documentary focuses on how these children feel compelled to do what they do because of their precarious condition. The film begins with zooming in on marginal urban areas of Comuna 13 and Ciudad Bolívar, where interviews with some minors are conducted. Then, it focuses on interviews with experts, such as officials at the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar [Colombian Family Welfare Institute] (ICBF), lawyers and even priests who, within their capacity, have been involved in the struggle of these youngsters.

The main objective of this documentary seems to be to reveal how children and adolescents in Colombia are easy tools for criminal organizations that illegally recruit minors to commit crimes because they are protected from being confined to jail, thanks to the Integrated Childhood and Adolescence Protection Law. Since the early 1980s, Colombian legislation penalizes and prosecutes only those over eighteen years of age. This is why children and teenagers who are caught committing criminal acts are not sentenced to penalties corresponding to the crime they commit. In other words, they can kill someone, get caught and be free and out in the streets again in a short time. According to Guerrero and Gómez (2018), this makes the Colombian Justice system a “co-participant of impunity”, providing criminals with an access door that enables them to “avoid being punished with the prison sentences they deserve.”³³

At the Gates of Hell raises the debate of whether the age of criminalization and prosecution of minors should be equated with penalties for adults or whether they should continue to be prosecuted as minors. The documentary shows the lack of protection by the government units responsible for ensuring compliance with the rules and the fundamental rights of children and adolescents to have a decent life. However, as Lisa Cristina Gómez from the ICBF indicates in the film, the phenomenon is not only the responsibility of the state, but also of the family, since this must be the first instance that oversees the protection and guarantee of the rights of children and adolescents. However, reality in Colombia is often quite different, with many families, instead of being protective, turning out to be expellers and by that, exposing the minors to some of the situations portrayed in the documentary.

All in all, *At the Gates of Hell* successfully exposes the alarming situation of many minors in Colombia. It shows how these “broken children” are programmed to act in favour of their survival under the principle of “kill or die”, a principle mentioned by José Baquero, former leader of “Los Pitufos – The Smurfs”, a criminal gang in Ciudad Bolívar south of Bogotá composed of 45 criminals of which only he is still alive and whose other members did not survive their teenage years. The “programming” is shaped by the context in when they are living, where killing often means getting money to survive and de-

fending themselves from enemies (usually the family or friends they kill). By showing this cruel dimension of Colombian society, the documentary contributes to the awareness of this problem and to the need to act in order to achieve change. However, this is also where one of the limitations of the film come to the surface. Throughout the narrative, there is no indication of a proposal for an alternative or a construction of a possible solution to the problems exposed, limiting itself exclusively to describing the situation.

At the Gates of Hell was released at a time when the Colombian government was debating whether or not to reduce the age for the criminalization and prosecution of minors, thus equating the penalties to those of an adult, or if they should continue to be prosecuted as children and adolescents. As such, the film came at the right time, but the question is to what extent new legislation would be able to solve such a historical and structural problem.⁴⁴ Bogotá and Medellín are the cities with the highest rate of use of children (aggression and homicides) subcontracted by collection offices, either to threaten, extort, assault or kill. Colombia lacks sufficient and serious criminal investigation to establish who goes to these tables of death to hire their services. Despite the existence of the Juvenile Justice System in Colombia, the country lacks a solid and comprehensive policy for the prevention of juvenile delinquency. How to guarantee non-repetition? How to integrate adolescents who leave the Juvenile Justice System to society? To families?

Through a unique series of interviews, *At the Gates of Hell: Broken Children* exposes how too many children and youths in Colombian cities are struggling to survive – and how far they go to survive in these risky environments. The documentary painfully shows that situations related to drugs, prostitution, and crimes often bring them on the brink of the abyss and make them into “broken children” from an early age. According to data provided by the ICBF, 70 percent of young Colombians who are apprehended for trafficking, carrying weapons, manufacturing narcotics, and theft, 4 percent for crimes against sexual integrity, and 2 percent for homicides. In the first months of 2019, the police had already more than 600 cases of adolescents. Some believe that (part of) the solution is to reduce the age for the processing of young people from 14 to 12 years old. There are others who still believe in the social cleansing by armed clandestine groups. But are these really solutions? Is there a solution?

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Notes

- ¹ Grupo de Investigación en Neurociencias – Neuros (2009). Enfermedades neuropediátricas afectan el desarrollo escolar de niños bogotanos. Programa de Divulgación Científica. Tomo IV Fascículo Interactivo 3. Facultad de Medicina de la Universidad del Rosario.
- ² Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica Colombia, Departamento para la Prosperidad Social (DPS), Embajada Suiza en Colombia, Corporación Región, Corporación Opción Legal, Organización Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM-Misión Colombia) y Fundación Semana (2016). *La huella invisible de la guerra: Desplazamiento forzado en la Comuna 13*. <https://repository.oim.org.co/bitstream/handle/20.500.11788/1026/COL-OIM%200163.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- ³ Guerrero, R. & Gómez, C. (2018) ¿Por qué el fenómeno de la Impunidad, en el delito de Homicidio, conduce al crecimiento de las tasas de criminalidad en la ciudad de Barranquilla? Barranquilla: Universidad Simón Bolívar; Oct 2018 [26 Feb 2019]. Available at: <http://bonga.unisimon.edu.co/handle/123456789/2365>
- ⁴ Cardozo, A., Cortés, O., Cueto, L., Meza, S., & Iglesias, A. (2013). Análisis de los factores de resiliencia reportados por madres e hijos adolescentes que han experimentado el desplazamiento forzado. *Revista Iberoamericana de Psicología: Ciencia y Tecnología*, 6 (2), 93-105.