

## Wearing *Ruana* and Tie: Trino Epaminondas Tuta Negotiates Power and His Rural Origins in the City

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### Abstract

In this article I argue that the fictional character of Trino Epaminondas Tuta, one of the main characters of Colombian television comedy *Romeo y buseta* (1987-1992), intervened the portrayal of the figure of the peasants from the Andean highlands in the city through the negotiation of meanings about the countryside, the city, and the power structures, and through the promotion of ideals that validate autochthonous cultural expressions. Moreover, I propose that the personification of the character and the content and aesthetic style of the comedy promoted notions of worth and respect about rural lifestyles in the city.

**Keywords:** comedy, television, countryside, city, peasantry, cultural studies

### Resumen

Este artículo propone que el personaje de Trino Epaminondas Tuta, protagonista de la comedia colombiana *Romeo y buseta* (1987-1992), hizo una intervención en la representación de la figura del campesino del altiplano andino en la ciudad a través de la negociación de significados sobre el campesinado, el campo, la ciudad y las estructuras de poder, y de la promoción de valores que validan las expresiones culturales autóctonas. Así mismo, propone que la encarnación del personaje, así como el contenido y la estética de la comedia, promovieron nociones de valoración y respeto por estilos de vida rurales en la ciudad.

**Palabras clave:** comedia, televisión, campo, ciudad, campesinado, estudios culturales

Although his stories were broadcast more than twenty years ago, Trino Epaminondas Tuta is still a well-remembered television character in Colombia. Don Trino, as he was also known, was one of the main characters of the television comedy *Romeo y buseta*, aired from 1987 through 1992 on one of the country's public T.V. stations.<sup>1</sup> Trino had arrived from the countryside as a poor peasant in the capital city and through hard work and determination became an entrepreneur and rich man. The character was portrayed by Jorge Velosa, who is also the creator and pioneer of *carranguera* music, a genre that narrates and disseminates the Andean peasants' lifestyle and culture.<sup>2</sup>

*Romeo y buseta* was created by Pepe Sánchez and it was produced by the private network Tevecine. The show ran for five years, and since in Colombia there are no television seasons, the show ran consecutively every week with the exception of Christmas and New Year's weeks. The show revolved around life in a low-income neighborhood and around the transportation business Transtuta Limited Company. It told the stories of the lives of Don Trino, the owner of Transtuta, his family, his neighbors, and the drivers who worked for him in the context of a *barrio popular* and the guild of *buseta* (small public bus) drivers in Bogotá in the 1980s. The company was called Transtuta Ltda. after his owner's name. *Romeo y buseta* sought to portray the life of immigrants from the countryside in the city, the tensions between rural and urban mentality, and the life of one of the most emblematic guilds of city life, that of *buseta* drivers. Trino's character embodies this encounter between rural and urban life, between a position of power and one of subordination.

In this article, I argue that the fictional character of Trino Epaminondas Tuta intervenes in the portrayal of the figure of the peasants from the Andean highlands through the negotiation of meanings about the countryside, the city, and the power structures, and through the promotion of ideals that validate native and autochthonous cultural expressions. As I will show later, Trino was a complex and contradictory character, and his intervention navigated the tensions between a position of power and a subordinate one. Trino was simultaneously a peasant and an urban entrepreneur, a rich man, who was considered from a lower sociocultural level, and an ambitious and greedy man, but yet honest. Furthermore, the complexities of Trino's character allowed for rural immigrants from the Andean region to recognize themselves in the show, both in the exaltation and exaggeration of their virtues and vices, because the character

was portrayed with humor but also with respect of their traditions and lifestyle. Massive rural migrations to the city during the second part of the twentieth century in Colombia created major social changes in the composition of the cities.<sup>3</sup> *Romeo y buseta*, and especially one of its emblematic characters, Trino Epaminondas Tuta, represented those changes, letting a big part of the Colombian population see themselves in the show, and allowing and encouraging them to laugh about the difficulties they suffered as rural immigrants in the city.

### ***Romeo y buseta*: Between Comedy of Manners and Sitcom**

*Romeo y buseta* was set in a *barrio* where people from different parts of the country lived together after arriving in the city seeking a better future. In Colombia, the concept of *barrio popular* implies an urban *barrio* formed by low-income workers and a place where not only mass and popular culture circulates but also folk life and traditions. The different settings of the stories included the streets of the *barrio* where Transtuta was located, the Tutas' home, Transtuta's headquarters in the *tienda* Las Margaritas, and the *busetas*. A *tienda* is a cross between coffee shop, convenience store, and restaurant, and a key place where social life develops. The Tuta family was formed by Don Trino, his wife Doña Amparo, and their children, Peter Alexander and Sonia Rocío. Don Trino Epaminondas Tuta was an immigrant with peasant origins from the Andean state of Boyacá, in the central highlands.<sup>4</sup>

The name *Romeo y buseta* was clearly a word play on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but in this case the female beloved was a *buseta*. The genre of the word in Spanish is female and the word play comments on how *buseta* drivers' (being the owners of the vehicles) related to them as in a romantic relationship, taking good care and protecting them. In addition, the name *Romeo* could be interpreted as making reference to one of the main characters of the show, William Guillermo. In the first episodes of the show, *buseta* driver William Guillermo was one of the most important characters; however, in 1989, he left the show. The stories evolved and the Tuta family, especially Trino's character, gained strength as well as the public's affection. The stories, then, focused mostly on the vicissitudes of the Tutas and their neighbors and employees. When William Guillermo's character was created, it was thought to be a *romeo*, meaning a guy who was very successful with women and a womanizer. In Colombia, the term *romeo* is used to signify the male partner in a romantic relationship. Sometimes, it is also used to imply a man who is the *romeo* of many women at the same time. In the play of words, that was a second connotation between the original *Romeo* and the *buseta*. This implied meaning lost pertinence when William Guillermo was no longer part of the show; however, the love relationship between the drivers and their *busetas* remained.

With *Romeo y buseta*, Pepe Sánchez continued the particular style of making television that he had previously used in another beloved comedy of manners called *Don Chinche* (1982-1989). Since Sánchez had studied film in Prague in the 1960s, his style of television production was strongly influenced by the Italian neorealism, and he applied this film style both to the filmmaking process and to the selection of the themes for the sitcom.<sup>5</sup> *Don Chinche* was a character that appeared originally in the celebrated television comedy *Yo y tú*.<sup>6</sup> It was interpreted by actor Héctor Ulloa. Although *Yo y tú* was over in 1976, *Don Chinche*'s character was still well remembered by the public around 1980, so the director of Radio Televisión Interamericana (RTI), a private television production company, decided to create a show about him.

*Don Chinche* was a handyman (mechanic, bricklayer, plumber, electrician, painter) in a lower-income *barrio* of Bogotá. The show narrated the struggles and adventures that *Don Chinche* and his neighbors faced to survive with scarce resources in the city. *Don Chinche* had peasant origins, and the other characters were also from the countryside, or from small cities or towns of the different regions of Colombia. There were the Santandereano, the Huilense, the Paisa, and the Bogotano, thus representing the cultural diversity of the nation.

*Don Chinche* had a cinematic style. Pepe Sánchez, who played the character Chepito in *Yo y tú*, was *Don Chinche*'s director. The Chilean cinematographer Dunav Kuzmanich was the scriptwriter and camera director. Most of *Don Chinche*'s scenes were filmed on location and with a single camera, which gave them a very natural and realistic style that was absent in all previous Colombian shows.<sup>7</sup> One of the most autochthonous and well-remembered characters of *Don Chinche* was William Guillermo, a talkative and outgoing *buseta* driver from Antioquia, a state on the northwestern part of the country. William Guillermo was so popular with the viewing audience that this character, like *Don Chinche*, was given a spin-off show: *Romeo y buseta*.

As in *Don Chinche*, *Romeo y buseta* depicted the lives of rural people who came to the city in search of better opportunities, but ended filling the lower social sectors. In this sense, the show portrayed issues like the discrimination to which rural immigrants were subject by urban people, unemployment or low salaries, or the difficulties they encountered while getting used to a big and fast-paced city. Following the style of Italian neorealism, the show focused on social themes and the adversities faced by people with scarce resources. In addition, from its inception, *Romeo y buseta* sought to comment on current and real events in the Colombian day-to-day life. For example, there was an episode about a Miss Sympathy contest that referenced the Miss Colombia contest. Another episode commented on the National Constituent Assembly of 1991, a convention where representatives from different political parties

gathered to amend and modify the constitution that was in place since 1886. Unfortunately, the new constitution of 1991 overlooked the peasants as a marginalized community and failed to acknowledge the peasants' disadvantaged position within Colombia's society and economy and did not give them visibility as a minority (Corrales et al. 2005, 128). In general, the show commented on and criticized politicians, the economy, beauty contests, and the social situation in Colombia. The show also portrayed the nation's cultural diversity by showing that many of the drivers were immigrants from the countryside and from small cities and towns. William Guillermo embodied the *paisa* from the western highlands; Homero, the *pastuso* from the southwestern mountains; Cleofas, the *valluno* from the southern Pacific coast; Paulina, the *chocoana* from the northern Pacific coast; and Lucho and Próspero, the *costeños* from the northern plains.

During its lifetime, the show was written by different scriptwriters including Mauricio Navas, Guillermo Calle, Juan Manuel Cáceres, and Beatriz Caballero, among others; similarly, it was directed by Pepe Sánchez, Guillermo Calle, William González and Herminio Barrera.<sup>8</sup> In regards to the filmmaking process and aesthetic style, Pepe Sánchez continued with the intended realism he used in *Don Chinche*. In its beginnings, when Sánchez and Calle directed, they recorded the show with one camera, as in film production. The show was intended to have a cinematic language even though they were running against time because they were making television. In addition, *Romeo y buseta* was also recorded solely on location. There were some interior scenes at the Tutas' home or in Las Margaritas, but many more on the streets of the *barrio*.

Unlike *Don Chinche*, which was recorded largely at Don Chinche's body shop and some houses in the surrounding blocks, in *Romeo y buseta* the camera followed the characters around the city. Since the stories revolved around the *buseta*, many episodes followed William Guillermo driving around the streets of Bogotá while showing the adventures, quarrels, and misunderstandings he had with passengers or fellow drivers. Many viewers, at least all those who used public transportation, could identify with these situations. Other times, the camera accompanied the characters while walking around the *barrio*, when going to visit a neighbor next block, when going to church, or to the bazaar on Sunday in the park. This was a great innovation at that time in Colombia's television production, and it was motivated by the interest of the producers in taking the camera outside of the studio and showing a loyal picture of everyday life.

This realistic style was also present in the photography and the music. The show used for the most part the natural lighting of each one of the locations. Similarly, the music played a key role in contextualizing and giving an organic feeling to the settings. Directors were very conscious about playing the music that would normally be heard in the *barrio*. For example, *carranguera* songs were played

often. *Carranguera* is a Colombian music genre, created, as mentioned above, by none other than Jorge Velosa, the actor who interpreted Trino's character. It was born in the central Andean highlands from the encounter between *merengue campesino*, a tune that mixed the traditional *torbellino*, *bambuco*, and *guabina*, with the newer *merengue vallenato*. It was a very popular rhythm in the Andean countryside during the 1980s and thus, playing it at the *tienda*, as it was portrayed in the show, was very common because it connected the people with their roots.

*Romeo y buseta* had features of both a comedy of manners and a situation comedy. On the one hand, it depicted and satirized the manners and lifestyle of the poor urban communities in Bogotá. In this sense, it made humor out of the clash between rural and urban mentalities. The comedy depicted how the customs of rural immigrants contrasted with those of urban people, and portrayed how rural people adapted their traditions to an urban environment. It also satirized the relationship of power between the owner of a business and his employees. The comedy show explored how this uneven relationship can become one of exploitation and disrespect, and how the powerless employees deal with their disadvantaged situation. In addition, it portrayed the political leadership of the nation, the absurdities generated by corruption, and how actions motivated by political and financial interests affected the daily life of lower social sectors of the city. On the other hand, the show was structured in form of a sitcom. Having the format of a series, it portrayed characters that lived in a common environment, in this case the *barrio*. The characters, as I mentioned, had different cultural backgrounds. Since there was such cultural diversity, one of the sources of humor was the misunderstandings and tensions created by the interaction between people with different idiosyncrasies.

Another source of humor was the nonsense situations that rural immigrants faced when arriving in the city. Since they arrived to live under very poor conditions, they had to find odd jobs and unusual activities that sometimes turned out to be amusing. The clash between rural and urban lifestyles was an additional source of humor. The show frequently mocked immigrants being discriminated against by city people. An example of this is Peter Alexander and Sonia Rocío taking advantage of Paulina's naivety. Paulina was a black immigrant from the Pacific coast. The sitcom also made fun of rural immigrants struggling to getting used to the urban setting. For example, it showed Próspero hanging his hammock in the middle of the park, an unusual place for hanging a hammock in Bogotá. Finally, the sitcom ridiculed the struggles over power in uneven relationships like the ones between boss and employees, or parents and children.

## Representing Reality

*Romeo y buseta* was aired with excellent ratings for five years. It was a comedy show that clearly intended to represent reality and to comment on the everyday issues that poor people in urban sectors had to face, through satire and irony. In addition, it sought to loyally portray the customs, quotidian practices, and ways of thinking of the people who lived in a *barrio* popular of Bogotá. As previously indicated, when Sánchez created the show he drew heavily on the social world outside the fiction, what the audience and he knew about migration from the country to the city or the stereotypes that defined each of the idiosyncrasies of the people of the different regions.

In the T.V. comedy, we searched for characters from different regions, and all interacted and lived in a *barrio* in Bogotá. This was done with the main objective of reflecting the reality of the *barrios* of Bogotá because it was clear: the different cultures of the country gathered in the capital in search of better opportunities for study, work, and housing. (Sánchez qtd. in Laurence 2004, 34)

Meanwhile, Guillermo Calle mentioned how the stories he created were born out of his interaction with real *buseteros* who lived in the *barrio* where the show was recorded. He explained that he used to get together with the drivers at the tienda and while they talked about their lives, anecdotes, and situations that made them laugh, Calle recorded all the conversations with a tape recorder. In addition, he used post-it notes at the restaurants of the *barrio* with an ad saying “neighbor, if you have stories tell them to me” (Calle qtd. in Laurence 2004, 123). He used to receive about five situations per week from which he created new stories.

The actors’ contributions and similar intentions to draw on their social world were equally important. For example, Velosa had a lot of input in the creation of the character of Trino. At the time, the transportation business was led by people from Boyacá, and that fact was a starting point both for the creators and the actor. Velosa researched his own culture and integrated his findings in his construction of the character. In an article discussing the comedy show, Velosa noted: “Attire, way of walking, way of talking, sayings, and the relationship with money, were all my contributions to the character, inspired by acquaintances from various places and by folk speech” (*El Tiempo*, July 6, 2014).

In addition, both directors and actors mentioned that the actors had a lot of freedom to improvise (Calle quoted in Laurence 2004, 130; Hernández quoted in Laurence 2004, 216). Since the actors who participated in the show had had a lot of participation in the construction of the characters and had been working in the show for so long, this was a technique that was successful for the production and that contributed to the intent to generate humor. As a result, the actors’ interests were also involved and played their part in the outcome of the characters’ dialogues and attitudes.

This kind of comedy emerged in Colombian television due to specific historical conditions. This show was produced when Colombian television service was owned by the state, and a multitude of private networks competed for the slots of emission. Although it was a slot determined by economic and commercial interests, the competition and the state’s regulation created an environment marked by diverse programming and ideological pluralism. Directors had the space and the liberty to offer their point of view and opinion about current issues in the nation. In this respect, Calle noted that “no one supervised my work, I had *carte blanche*, I did what I wanted. Jorge Ospina, the owner of Tevecine, told me that as long as I kept all expenses within the budget, I could do whatever I wanted. Nobody looked into the scripts” (Calle quoted in Laurence 2004, 128). Thus, it can be said that the show reflected in many ways the director’s interests and points of view about the reality of the country and the topics handled.

It is essential to highlight the fact that the producers and the actors had a clear intention of representing the customs and the worldview of ordinary people who, up until then, had been mostly misrepresented or underrepresented in Colombian television. The creators of the comedy, the directors, the actors, the director of photography, drew heavily on their social surroundings allowing the comedy to create a space where the audience could identify.

## Trino: A Complex Character

The genre of comedy relies heavily on stereotypes, because the exaggeration and over-simplification of certain traits tends to be amusing for audiences. In the specific case of *Romeo y buseta*, many of the characters were stereotypes of people from each region. The contrast and clash between the customs and worldviews of people from the different parts of the country seemed funny and a source of amusement.<sup>9</sup> The characters that embodied the *costeños* were stereotyped and did not have multiple psychological dimensions in comparison to the characters from the highlands. A common stereotype that Colombian culture has created around people from the coasts is that they are loud, obnoxious, lazy, irresponsible, and party-goers. This was exactly how the characters in the show were depicted. For example, the character of Próspero illustrates this view. In the episodes where he appears, he sleeps until late, and he eats the food at his aunt’s home, causing her to ask him to leave. Próspero is thus homeless, and some of the drivers take pity on him and lend him money. Continuing the stereotypical representation of the *costeño*, Próspero takes several months to pay his lenders back (Calle 1989, “Próspero paga el dinero”).<sup>10</sup>

Trino’s character, on the other hand, is complex and psychologically rounded. He is moody, an exploiter, and *machista*, but he is at the same time an honest and respectable person. An example that illustrates both his virtues and defects is when Trino finds Paulina selling *cocadas* (a

traditional coconut candy). When Paulina complains that she is trapped in his house because she owes money to his children, he tells her that she can leave whenever she wants. However, he clarifies that if she wants to make a business and cook *cocadas* in his kitchen, she has to share the profits with him. In this scene, Trino behaves like a greedy man but, at the same time, he gives Paulina the opportunity to run her own business in his kitchen. Guillermo Calle stated that:

We worried a lot about rescuing people's values, like honesty, truth, transparency. Even Tuta, who embodied power, was a decent man. There were not truly bad people. The characters were good or bad depending on their interests according to the circumstances. Trino was an exploiter, but he had moments of great humanity that when you saw him you really sympathized with the character despite him being a public enemy. (Calle quoted in Laurence 2004, 134)

As a psychologically rounded character, Trino contributed to a new portrayal of the peasants from the *cundiboyacense* highlands through his exaggeration of peasants' virtues such as being hard-working and frugal. Peasants from this region have been known by their hard work, servitude and austerity. These characteristics were seen as positive. When presented in a comedy and with the purpose of generating humor via Trino's character, they are an exaggeration. However they achieve the goal of countering a dominant stereotype that associates peasantry with backwardness and ignorance. The episode "¡A trabajar!" ("Back to Work!"), directed by Calle, illustrates this fact. When Trino finds Laureano cleaning the *busetas*, he praises him for his hard work. In the next scene, Trino arrives at Las Margaritas, the headquarters of Transtuta, and finds the drivers hanging out. He does not say hello, instead he starts calling "Back to work! Back to work!" Also, when Trino runs into Próspero, the *costeño*, who is still sleeping in the middle of the morning, he tells him how important it is to work hard.

Another positive feature that is exacerbated in the comedy is frugality. In Trino's character, this characteristic is represented as an obsession with money. This is illustrated in the aforementioned encounter with Paulina where he has the need to charge her a fee for using his house for a business of her own. Another clear manifestation of Trino's greediness is his infamous saying: "tengo la jeta redonda de decir oro." Literally translated this phrase would be: "My mouth is round from saying the word 'gold'," but what its meaning needs further explanation. In Spanish, the word for gold is *oro*, which in turn connotes wealth. When you pronounce the word *oro* in Spanish, since it has two "o"s and only one consonant, your mouth makes a rounded shape as if you were sending a kiss to the air. Thus, since Trino has so much money, he says the word *oro* very often. When he states that his mouth is rounded, he means that he has so much *oro* that his mouth has acquired a permanent rounded

shape. This kind of saying, in addition to his attitudes toward people like Paulina, helped reinforce his greedy image.

These scenes show how Trino became a character that associated the peasants with greediness but also with hard work. We learn in other episodes that Trino is from peasant origins and that when he came to the city he was poor and went through financial difficulties. This may explain why he became so greedy and prudent. We also know that he became the owner of a company through his diligence. So, even though we do not see him working hard, we know he did at some point. Thus, simultaneously, his character shows the peasants' virtues like their hard work and frugality in a positive manner, because they allowed him to climb the social ladder and achieve a better quality of life. Trino is, at the same time, an example of transformation. In brief, Trino's character delivered a portrayal of the peasants that countered the traditional one, and presented itself as a psychologically rounded and complex character.

### Trino: Negotiating Contradictions

In addition to using stereotypes, comedies also draw on clear-cut binary oppositions to create humorous situations. The analysis of these oppositions in Trino's character confirms once again that his is a complex and contradictory personification of a rural immigrant from the highlands. In this case, the poles of the binary oppositions meet and are negotiated. Trino embodies the meeting of urban and rural ways of thinking, and of being rich and belonging to a lower socio-cultural level.

Firstly, Trino's dress is the materialization of the meeting between the rural and the urban. He wears a complete suit with jacket and tie like a professional would do in an urban environment. However, he combines the suit with a *pañó* hat and a *ruana*, which are characteristic of peasant attire.<sup>11</sup> He uses solid color suits like dark or light blue, red, or yellow. According to social ideas of fashion, his taste is very particular and would be qualified as bad taste. Although he abandoned the *alpargatas*, he sometimes wears the *ruana* with his suit and keeps the *pañó* hat at all times. He never takes it off, not even indoors.

But this encounter between the rural and the urban that the comedy show explores is not only evidenced in Trino's attire, it is also illustrated in his speech. Trino uses many sayings in form of verse that make reference to traditional oral wisdom. This is a way of preserving the way peasants from the *cundiboyacense* highlands talk and an attempt to circulate their knowledge about life and their beliefs. For example, Trino often emphasizes the importance of working hard through his speech. In the scene in which he finds Próspero on his hammock in the mid-morning, he uses a verse to draw his attention to the importance of working: "if you want wealth and success, don't let the sun find you in bed" (*Si quiere riqueza y fama/ que no lo coja el sol en*

la cama) (Calle “¡A Trabajar!”). When he praises Laureano for cleaning the *busetas*, he also uses a verse to express his sympathy: “when you give your whole heart and soul to work, there is no donkey that can topple the packsaddle” (Cuando al trabajo se le pone todo el corazón y toda el alma, no hay burro que tumba la enjalma) (Calle “¡A trabajar!”). Trino is now an urban person, but he keeps many of the customs and traditions of his native culture. Through his choice of speech and outfit he draws attention to issues related to the countryside and he promotes their culture and lifestyle.



Figure 1. The Tuta family

Don Antuquito’s character also exemplifies the encounter of rural practices and urban settings. Don Antuquito was an elderly carpenter, member of the liberal political party and follower of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.<sup>12</sup> He was originally from Bogotá and was very knowledgeable of the history of the city and the nation. One day, Don Antuquito gets the flu, and when Sonia Rocío asks him how he is feeling, he replies “Much better, the virgin of the palm performed the miracle for me” (“Mucho mejor, la virgen de la palma me hizo el milagrito”) (Barrera 1991, “Perro mundo”). His answer evidences that he believes his flu went away thanks to the prayers he paid to the Virgin of the Palm. In another episode, Don Antuquito needs his savings to help Paulina with some money. When he goes to get the money, he does not go to the bank; instead, he lifts the mattress of his bed to find the cash underneath (Calle 1989, “Fiesta”). This scene comments on the fact that sometimes people are afraid of losing their

money to the bank preferring to keep it under the mattress and on the fact that since in remote rural areas there are no banks close-by, people are used to keeping their money under the mattress.

Lastly, the setting of the comedy, the urban *barrio popular*, is itself a continuum between the countryside and the city. A *barrio popular* is mostly formed by rural immigrants or people with peasant origins. Thus, it is a *barrio* formed by people who keep some of their rural customs while living in an urban setting, which is why this type of neighborhood is characterized both by folk and mass culture. The two poles, the rural and the urban, come together and yield the emergence of a culture in its own right, a culture which today is common to most of Colombian population due to increased migration to the cities in the second half of the twentieth century.

Trino also incarnated the encounter between economic wealth and a positioning in a lower socio-cultural level. The episodes “El carro estrellado” (“The Car Crash”) and “Los Tuta compran una casa nueva” (“The Tutas Buy a New House”) illustrate the Tutas’ wealth. First, Trino decides to buy a new house for the family. Several episodes later, when Álvaro Pío, Amparo’s nephew, and Peter Alexander crash Trino’s old car, Amparo convinces him to buy a new one. In both episodes, we see that the Tuta family has purchasing power, a fact that is especially evident when compared to the financial situation of the other characters that have very little.

The character of Trino is well aware of his economic power, as evidenced by his frequent use of the phrase “my mouth is round of saying the word ‘gold’” in which he reminded everyone of how rich he was. This expression caused many laughs in Colombia because of the irony implied in Trino’s lack of humbleness when referencing his wealth. This was ironic because many times the Andean peasants are pigeonholed as naive and humble. In contrast, Trino was always very explicit and upfront, even arrogant, when it came to his wealth and power. Trino’s overt pride made people laugh and the phrase became very popular and well-remembered by Colombian people.

In multiple occasions, the characteristics that are inherent to Trino’s character extend to the members of his family because they also incarnate power, and its mockery. Although Trino and his family are wealthy, they are still regarded as ignorant and as having bad taste by urban elites, which is another manifestation of the tensions between having economic wealth and belonging to a lower sociocultural level. This tension is illustrated by the relationship between Trino’s son, Peter Alexander, and Wendy Tatiana, the *gomela*. In the comedy, the mentality of the middle- and upper-sociocultural levels was personified by a young lady named Wendy Tatiana. Wendy Tatiana lived in the same neighborhood as the Tutas and like their son Peter Alexander she went to college. Going to college

allowed for both of them to be in contact with people with better access to education and material resources. However, since Peter Alexander's parents had clear peasant origins, his behavior was a mixture of rural and urban lifestyles.

Besides incarnating the upper- and middle sociocultural level's mentality, Wendy Tatiana also represented the *gomelos*. *Gomelos* and *gomelas* were a Colombian youth culture that emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s from the cultural influence of the United States. US American cultural expansionism was triggered and accentuated by the new technologies and globalization that allowed the massive circulation of US American advertisements, television shows, and films. Because of this cultural influence, during this time, many young people in Colombia defined being cool and fashionable as looking as US American as possible. This mentality dominated their clothing, the music they listened to, their way of talking, and the way they related to each other. They spoke English or incorporated English words in their conversations in Spanish, and this, they thought, gave them a higher social status. With the influence of the mass media and the film industry in the second half of the twentieth century, Colombian middle urban sociocultural levels that previously identified with European culture via the Hispanist project developed by the lettered elites during the nineteenth century, switched to identify with US American culture as well, overlooking their own roots and ancestry.

The episode "Fiesta inolvidable" ("Unforgettable Party") depicts this issue very well.<sup>13</sup> This episode satirizes the *gomelos* youth culture and makes explicit references to the US cultural influence across fashion, speech, and leisure activities. This episode exacerbates the presence of US cultural imperialism in Colombia. For example, Wendy Tatiana's friends use verbal expressions in English in their conversations; their fashion style is a punk style appropriated to the Colombian context, mixed with the Alf hairstyle;<sup>14</sup> and the kind of party they organized is a *miniteca* which imitate the clubs of big cities like New York where the party is animated by a DJ.

Being cool and fashionable meant to appear to be US American, and the inability or the decision not to follow this social trend triggered new ways of discrimination among young people. This kind of discrimination is illustrated more specifically in the relationship between Wendy Tatiana and Peter Alexander in the episode about the "unforgettable party." Throughout this episode, she criticizes him and calls him *ñero* which is a derogatory idiom that means tacky with the connotation of being very poor. She also tells him that she prefers to go to the "north" (the wealthiest part of the city) to have lunch with her friends from college rather than hanging out with him. In the second part of the episode when she goes to see his house to verify it works for hosting the *miniteca*, she makes fun of the decoration, the colors of the walls and the furniture and tells him how ugly it is, implying that he and his family have very bad taste.<sup>15</sup>

### Trino: Navigating Power

A third aspect in which the character of Trino intervenes in the portrayal of the rural immigrants in the city is by impersonating power in the context of the *barrio*. As the incarnation of power, Trino is the sole owner of the transportation company, and most characters in the show work for him or for his family. The drivers of the *busetas* work for his company, Paulina is his maid, and Marujita sews for Amparo and Sonia Rocío, Trino's wife and daughter, respectively. Most of these employees respect Trino and follow his orders to the letter. Even the police officers, who are featured in at least one episode of the comedy, show respect and reverence to him. According to Guillermo Calle, the characters of Trino and Amparo were created with the objective of having a powerful family in the neighborhood. They were going to play the role of owners of the neighborhood, through being the owners of the *busetas*, and the goal was to have all the other characters make fun of them. The power was embodied by the Tutas, and the neighborhood revolved around them (Calle quoted in Laurence 2004, 115).

In addition, Alvaro Pío, Trino's nephew, impersonates the typical Colombian politician in the series. In the episode "Arrancó la Constituyente" ("The Constituent Assembly Began"), Álvaro Pío asks his uncle for support to launch a political campaign to participate in the National Constituent Assembly. In this episode, Pío gives speeches to the drivers in which he promises them that he will get them wonderful benefits if they vote for him. The benefits he offers are blatant lies. For example, he tells the drivers that he will buy a stereo for each *busesta*. This scene criticizes and comments on the way politicians make unreal promises many times to the people when they are campaigning, and when they are elected they do not keep their promises. Pío is well aware of Trino's power and tells him that it would be a great opportunity to have the *busesta* drivers politically represented in the assembly and that Pío himself would be the best candidate for that. Trino understands how beneficial it would be to have his nephew representing his interests. As a result, he calls all of his colleagues from the drivers' guild to ask them for their support. Unfortunately for all of them, Pío is not able to collect all the signatures required to participate as a candidate, regardless of Trino's power. Even though Pío's original plan is not successful, the situation shows the political and convening power that Trino has both in his community and in his guild.

While Trino represents the power in the comedy, he also incarnates a marginalized and subordinate group within Colombian society and a very specific kind of rural immigrant: the peasant from the state of Boyacá. In Colombia, peasants are stereotyped as backward and ignorant; discrimination against the peasants is associated with issues of race, class, purchasing power, refinement and taste; and, the peasants are overlooked and excluded from the spheres of participation (Corrales et al. 2005, 129).

Moreover, it is common to find images, sayings, and jokes that mock them and associate them with backwardness, foolishness, and naiveté, undervaluing their traditions and cultural heritage. For example the word “boyaco” which is short for boyacense (a person from Boyacá) has a derogatory connotation that implies being stupid, slow, and backward. Peasants are mostly farmworkers in small-size lands who are usually paid very little for their crops and their contribution to the national economy is mostly overlooked.<sup>16</sup> Although Trino got out of that situation, those are his roots and his origins, and, as it is shown in the comedy show, he remained loyal and true to his ancestries. It is in this sense that Trino embodies yet another contradiction. In the universe of *Romeo y buseta*, Trino embodies the instances of power within the microcosm of the barrio. However, in the macrocosms of society, he is still excluded, discriminated, and marginalized.

### Trino: Promoting Autochthonous Cultural Expressions

Besides being complex and contradictory, and navigating power within a larger subordinate position, in many situations, Trino resists foreign cultural influences through the promotion of ideals that validate native and autochthonous cultural expressions. As mentioned previously, Trino achieves this by mixing urban attire with elements of the traditional peasant dress, such as the hat and the *ruana*. He also accomplishes this through the frequent use of traditional sayings or with the invention of new ones, but keeping the transmission of knowledge through spoken language such as sayings and verses.

Another example of his resistance happens in the last scene of the episode “Fiesta inolvidable” (“Unforgettable Party”). As noted above, in this episode, Wendy Tatiana and Peter Alexander organized a *miniteca* party at Peter Alexander’s house counting on the fact that his parents were out of town. The main conflict of the story in this episode begins when the viewers find out that Trino is back in Bogotá earlier than expected. When Trino arrives home, he discovers a huge party in progress. Trino gets very upset, starts yelling, and asks everyone to leave the house. After everyone leaves, Trino starts playing with the sound system. At that moment, the audience starts listening to different types of music from various countries: American and British pop songs, Argentinean and Mexican rock-pop, among others. After skipping several songs, Trino finally finds traditional Colombian music: *torbellino*.

Interestingly, this scene is more dramatic than comedic. The space is darker, there is not much light. When Trino is going through the different kinds of music, we see him in a full figure shot from the back. When he finds Colombian music, he stops to listen to it, and then he turns towards the camera to ask passionately to the party goers: “Do you realize that

there is pretty music one can have fun with? Pretty music, music from our country. That is why this country is how it is, because no one loves it, because no one loves it!” (“¿Se dan cuenta que sí hay musiquita linda con la que uno también se puede divertir? Música bonita, música del país. Por eso este país está como está, porque nadie lo quiere, ¡porque nadie lo ama!”) (Barrera 1991, “Fiesta inolvidable”). The young people at the party had already left and didn’t hear him, but the viewers did. Then, the camera shows him in a close-up shot and we can see his face and the tears running down his cheek. The episode ends here with the *torbellino* by Jorge Ariza playing.<sup>17</sup>

In this scene, Trino is sad because Colombian people, the *gomelos* in particular, do not appreciate their indigenous culture and their roots. The party symbolizes the loss of connection with their own background. Trino cries when he sees this disconnection, and with his words, he explicitly criticizes this attitude, resisting, and contesting it. In this scene Trino denounces the foreign cultural domination to which his people have been subjected and makes a strong statement in favor of autochthonous cultural expressions.

To conclude, Trino emerges as a figure where several contradictory forces converge and one that unvaryingly negotiates oppositions. Thus, in spite of his flaws, like greediness and obsession with work, everyone in the barrio respected and admired him. He was the example to follow for many of the characters because he had the same origins as them, and had arrived in the city under the same circumstances. Trino had been able to overcome the difficulties and climb the economic ladder. Furthermore, in navigating his powerful position in the universe of the story, he promoted values that made him proud of his peasant origins. Not only does he explicitly state that people should value their own music, the music tied to their roots and their traditions, he also cherishes the speech and knowledge from his ancestries.

*Romeo y buseta* was a television production that truly acknowledged and made an important effort to portray the customs, traditions, lifestyle, and speech of a large part of the Colombian population. Its emblematic character, Trino Epaminondas Tuta was complex and contradictory, given that in his personification he combined both the vices and the virtues of his people; nevertheless, his characterization was respectful, paying tribute and validating the Andean rural traditions and customs. This way of representing the character, as well as the comedy show’s explicit intent to represent reality through its choice of content and aesthetic style, offered a portrayal of the highlands rural immigrant that, through humor, created a role model embodied in Trino that promoted notions of worth and respect about rural lifestyles in the city.



## Notes

- 1 Señal Colombia, the Colombian public network, broadcast this comedy again in 2014.
- 2 Jorge Velosa is a cultural activist who makes a statement in favor of the peasant community and culture through his carranguera music, but also through talks, conferences, and educational initiatives.
- 3 Betancourt and Corredor (1975) affirm that the urban population increased by almost 500% between 1938 and 1973, while the rural population grew only 36.7%. In addition, they note the aggravating factor that between 1964 and 1973, the rural population decreased 2.8% total (39).
- 4 To see some of the settings and characters of the comedy see the intro to the show at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewvbUk-A4IE>.
- 5 In an interview with Colombian media scholar Omar Rincón (1995), Pepe Sánchez stated: “I am very interested in everyday life since and because of the [Italian] Neorealism. This implies a permanent measuring up of things, a questioning of who we are, how our everyday life is. I’ve always had the mania of watching people around me, of participating in all things folk, perhaps because I’ve always been involved with the people due to my political activism. I think, unlike many people, that in everyday life there is great poetry and that it is worth unraveling... The everyday life that interests me is the one of the middle classes and below because it reveals how we are in each place. I prefer folk environments because there is where our true essence is. On the contrary, the rich people’s everyday life is very much like any other elite class lifestyle in any part of the world; you would just follow the model” (71). See Rincón, Omar. 1995. “Expresar a Colombia en televisión: Pepe Sánchez.” *Signo y pensamiento* 26 (XIV): 65-74. All translations from Spanish are mine.
- 6 The pinnacle of television comedy in Colombia, up until now, has been *Yo y tú / You and me* which ran for twenty consecutive years beginning in 1956. Created, written, and directed by Spanish Alicia del Carpio, it had a very strong critical component showing both the virtues and vices of Bogotá’s society.
- 7 “Don Chinche was a success for several reasons. On the one hand, the stories and the script, written by Pepe Sánchez, were rich in diverse characters and so quotidian that the public easily identified with them. On the other, the production was made with 100% outdoor cinematic techniques because the director, Pepe Sánchez, wanted the main character in a real environment” (Amaral et al. 2004, 99).
- 8 Pepe Sánchez directed up to episode number twenty-five. Then Guillermo Calle, Sánchez’s scriptwriter and assistant director, directed during 1988 and part of 1989. William González took the direction during part of 1989 and during 1990. He was replaced by Herminio Barrera who directed during part of 1990 and into 1991 when the sitcom ended. The episodes analyzed here are all by Calle, González, and Barrera. However, they maintained the principles and style that Sánchez first proposed. I did not have access to Sánchez’s episodes because at the time, the network re-used the tapes and recorded other shows on top of them.
- 9 Pepe Sánchez affirmed that “having in mind that it was a comedy, the idea of using the characteristics of each region would enrich the arguments and give more possible themes and humorous situations” (quoted in Laurence 2004, 34).
- 10 Although the show intended to depict people from the different areas of the country; it was more popular in the Andean region, especially in the *cundiboyacense* highlands. It did not have much success in the Atlantic coast and with no surprise since the depiction of its characters was very stereotyped and the stories were centered in Bogotá. “This comedy was well received throughout the country, the only place where it never had good reception was on the coast: Barranquilla, Cartagena, Sincelejo did not see it. It seemed to them very bogotano, highly centralized, that it did not take them into account, even though there were one or two characters from the coast. In Antioquia it stuck, Viejo Caldas [coffee region], Boyacá, Meta, all these were fans of us... Rating measurements of the coast were always short, the rest of the country very good, Bogotá very good, Bogotá always stayed very good, coffee region was excellent, Santanderes worked, as well, and Boyacá because of Velosa and the carranga, they were obviously fans of the show” (Calle quoted in Laurence 2004, 125).
- 11 *Paño* is a thick wool fabric, and the *ruana* is a warm woolen poncho.
- 12 Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was a liberal political leader assassinated on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1948. This event triggered riots and violent protests in Bogotá on that day and is said to have intensified political violence in the whole country.
- 13 A complete recording of this episode can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuhQlrhvx0E>. The shots and framings of the version reproduced in YouTube are slightly different from the one I analyzed. I based my analysis of the copies provided by Fundación Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano in DVD.
- 14 The Alf hairstyle became fashionable, during the late 80s, out of the imitation of the hairstyle of the extraterrestrial character of the sitcom *Alf*.

15 See min. 16:03 in previously provided YouTube link.

16 “The agricultural sector in the Colombian economy and, more specifically, the vast majority of its population is marginalized; in regards to the distribution of the product there is a marked concentration of income to the detriment of the majority of its inhabitants. In regards to health and education, these services are scarcely known in the countryside” (Betancourt and Corredor 1975, 35).

17 See min. 36:20 in YouTube link.

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