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THE COMMODIFICATION OF NARCO-VIOLENCE THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE AND TOURISM IN MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA

Patrick Naef

Although tourism is already flourishing in some regions of Colombia, the country is still struggling to achieve peace. On 2 October 2016, just over half of the Colombian population rejected the peace deal negotiated by President Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Two months later the nation's Congress finally ratified a renegotiated peace deal between the government and the largest guerrilla group of the country. After more than a half century of armed conflict,

peace has never been so close, yet many Colombians are still reluctant to see former war actors such as the FARC's reintegrate civilian and political life.

In the context of this long-lasting war, violence is memorialized in diverse and fragmented ways. Since the establishment of a national law for victims and the displaced in 2011, various memorial projects related to the armed conflict involving the Colombian army, paramilitaries and guerrillas have been cropping up all over the country. This marks a change, as memorial issues were not previously prevalent; most of the victims still felt vulnerable and consequently did not want to participate in any memorial processes. The law for victims and the displaced thus provided a more secure and favourable context for the emergence of memorial initiatives.

The state has been active in the field of memory by supporting the construction of museums and documentary projects on the war, involving victims, academics and NGOs, the National Centre for Historical Memory being the principal example in this context. In parallel, alternative memorial productions relating to the war and the 'narcoheritage' (Naef, 2015) have started up. In Bogota and Medellin, both relatively tolerant environments regarding urban art, many murals flourish, illustrating themes associated with violence and social conflicts. These topics are also the focus of contemporary musical creations, from hip-hop to salsa, alternating between tributes to victims and narco-glorification. Moreover, while Mexico is famous for its *narcocorridos* (folk ballads focusing on the stories of drug smugglers), Colombia is also the cradle of many cultural productions, ranging from literature and *narco-novelas* (novels) to *narco-soaps* (soap operas). The cinema industry is similarly cashing in on this subject through the production of Colombian and international films, some of them – like *Blow*, featuring Johnny Depp and Penélope Cruz – reaching a worldwide audience.

This contribution aims to explore how popular culture and tourism participates in the memorialization of this dissonant (Ashworth et al., 2007) and violent heritage, and contributes to the commodification of violence. It is postulated that beyond public museums and memorials, popular culture and tourism represent an alternative and more organic way of memorializing violence. Some of these cultural productions are considered in the light of concepts related to the anthropology of tourism, such as trivialization, glamorization and commodification. Violence and memory are conceptualized as transversal objects featuring in an interdisciplinary perspective that covers fields such as history, anthropology and social geography.

Setting the scene: Medellin, from the most violent to the most innovative city

The exact setting of this analysis is the city of Medellin, the second largest town in Colombia. Often pictured as the most violent city in the world until recently, it is now rising from its ashes: an active promotion campaign is presenting it as the most innovative city in the world. Nevertheless, Medellin has been seriously affected by the war and the trauma is still vivid for many inhabitants. The surrounding slums have been experiencing first a significant number of street gangs and then the infiltration of guerrilla and paramilitary groups during the 1990s and the beginning of the current century.

Medellin is also notorious for being the capital of the cocaine business in the 1980s and 1990s, especially during the rule of the Medellin Cartel and its boss Pablo Escobar, who was killed on 2 December 1993. His ghost is now haunting the city, present in murals, clothing and tourism, but also on a more global scale through literature, TV shows and movies. *Narcos*, produced in 2015 by the US channel *Netflix*, looks back during its first season at the life of the drug king-pin and is already a worldwide success. Some tourist practices are also developing and presenting the history of violence in Medellin.

‘Pablo Escobar tours’ constitute one of the most popular offers of the emerging international tourism market (Giraldo et al., 2014; Naef, in Press) and the small informal museum run by Roberto Escobar, his brother and former bookkeeper of the Medellín cartel, represents a star feature of the backpacker trail.

Reality and fiction in Medellín’s mediascape

If the resonance of *narcocorridos* and narco-soaps is usually limited to a local audience, certain productions in other fields of popular culture definitely achieve worldwide success. The Spanish writer Arturo Pérez-Reverte undoubtedly contributed to the fame of *Narcos* when in 2004 he wrote his celebrated novel: *La reina del Sur (The Queen of the South)*, portraying Teresa Mendoza, a Mexican-born woman who becomes a successful drug trafficker in Spain.

Nowadays, Pablo Escobar is also the focus of wide-reaching productions. In the cinema industry, Andrea Di Stefano directed his first movie in 2014, featuring Benedicto del Toro as Escobar in *Paradise Lost*. Furthermore, as these lines are written, Tom Cruise is preparing a new production called *Mena*, where the American actor plays a drug smuggler and a CIA informant who worked with the Medellín Cartel. According to the *New York Times*, ‘Tom Cruise’s arrival [in Medellín] was happily embraced by city officials, who decided to bend the Film Commission rule on narc films’ (Londoño, 2015). Javier Bardem and Penélope Cruz are also filming another biopic scheduled for 2017, entitled *Escobar*, centred on his sentimental relationship with a journalist.

In Colombian cinema, some movies, usually adapted from popular novels, have also been successful beyond the national borders. *La Virgen de los sicarios (Our Lady of the Assassins)*, produced in 2000 by Barbet Schroeder, and depicting the violence of the narcos in Medellín during the 1990s, was recognized as the best Latin American movie

at the Venice International Film Festival. Likewise, the movie based on the well-known novel of Jorge Franco, *Rosario Tijeras*, was nominated for the Spanish Goya Award for the best foreign film. It is reportedly the sixth highest-grossing film in Colombian history, with more than 1 million tickets sold (Colprensa, 2015). The novel was also broadcast as a televised series in 2010, under the slogan 'It is harder to love than to kill'. The show sparked controversies in Colombia and beyond. The *Guardian* describes it in an article entitled: 'Colombians outraged by narco-soaps glamorising cartels' (Brodzinsky, 2010). According to the British newspaper, negative reactions were heard even in neighbouring Panama, where president Ricardo Martinelli officially declared that the show exalted drug trafficking, theft and mugging; damaging its own country and corrupting its moral values. Similarly, in *El Colombiano*, the former secretary of Education of Medellin, Ramiro Valencia Cossio (2010), harshly called into question the justification of the producers, when they stated that the show was no more than a reflection of Medellin's reality:

Liars ... Some search only for money and the others fame. [...] All of them are responsible for every young kid who, inspired by *el capo*, *Las muñecas de la mafia*, *El cartel de los sapos*, *Rosario Tijeras* ... turns into a gangster. Yes, they are responsible for every new *sicario* [hit man].

(Translated from Spanish by the author)

Popular culture and violence feed each other: fiction is significantly inspired by the violent context of narco-culture, while the Colombian mediascape is an important breeding ground for some of the violent aspirations of local youth. The 1998 movie *La vendedora de rosas* (*The Rose Seller*), directed by Victor Gaviria, nominated for the Cannes Festival 'Palme d'Or' and also part of the ten highest-grossing films in Colombia, is a sad illustration of this dynamic. Gaviria, in order to capture the reality of Medellin's

slums, hired mostly street kids, imposing them only with few directions in their acting.

As he recalls:

It was one of the points where the limit between documentary and fiction was the closest. Some were acting while others were playing in an altered state, which was theirs anyway. It is by sniffing glue that they express their sadness.

(Rigoulet, 1998)

Most of the actors met a tragic fate after the movie: some were assassinated while others finished in prison, like the main actor Leidy Tabares, due to her involvement in the murder of a taxi driver in Medellin (Cano, 2014).

If we look specifically at the Colombian mediascape of the last decade, the most successful production is without any doubt the televised series on Pablo Escobar, *El Patron del mal (The Boss of Evil)*. In 2012, the national TV channel *Caracol Television* broadcast every weeknight one of the 113 one-hour episodes of this series retracing the life of Escobar. Although the show triggered criticism on the glorification of the infamous drug lord, it was enormously successful: the first episode was watched by 11 million Colombians, or 62.7 per cent of people watching television at this time (Edition of *Cosecha Roja*, 2012). The show won an international audience and was broadcast in 66 countries including North Korea; it is now considered as one of the biggest successes in the history of Colombian television (Wallace, 2013). An important feature in our context is the fact that it was produced and directed by close victims of Escobar. The producer, Camilo Cano, is one of the five sons of Guillermo Cano, who was the director of the newspaper *El Espectador* until his assassination by one of Escobar's hit men. The director, Juana Uribe, was the niece of one of the most fervent opponents of Escobar: Luis

Carlos Galón, a presidential candidate who was also killed on the orders of the ‘boss of evil’ (Gómez, 2012).

Another television series related to Escobar that won a worldwide audience is the Netflix production, *Narcos*. While the principal sources for *El patron del mal* were Colombian victims, *Narcos* is partly based on the testimonies of two Drug Enforcement Agents (DEA), who served as consultants for the production. Former agents Steve Murphy and Javier Pena were operating in Medellin in the 1980s and are now the main characters of the show. Even though they agree that the real heroes were the Colombian National Police and that ‘they were just doing their jobs and trying to have a good time’ (Steve Murphy interviewed in *Men’s Journal*, Throp, 2015), the international perspective on this traumatic memory is often criticized in Colombia.

Besides the recurrent complaint that the Brazilian actor Wagner Moura who portrays Escobar has a foreign accent, the simplification of the complex issues associated with narco-trafficking is widely criticized. As the blogger Bernardo Aparicio Garceva states: ‘Watching *Narcos* seemed to me like grabbing a bag of popcorn and watching my country burn. [...] What bastardized idea of Colombia was about to spread through popular culture?’ (Aparicio Garcia, 2015). Furthermore, the combination of documentary footage and fiction can be problematic, affecting people closely related to this violence, especially in a context where fiction and reality is often blurred. Another blogger, Pablo Medina Uribe, mentions for instance the footage of the murder of his grandmother’s brother in law, used in falsified circumstances in the TV show (Medina Uribe, 2015). He adds that Colombians are robbed of their own history: ‘which becomes a mere plot device, cut down too fine, shredded pieces for American audiences to digest without having to gnaw on the bones’ (ibid.).

The former boss of the Medellín cartel is not the only one to be featured in Colombian *narco-soaps*. Many television series, most of them broadcast on the national channel Caracol Televisión, are closely linked to the country's history of drugs and violence. *La viuda negra* (*The Black Widow*) depicts the history of Griselda Blanco (also featured in *El patron del mal*), who was one of the pioneers in the cocaine business. *Las muñecas de la Mafia* (*The Mafia Dolls*) or *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (*Without Tits There Is No Paradise*) are other examples describing Colombia's narco-history. Yet none of these shows achieved the huge success of *El Patron del mal*, which even included the creation of a 16-page children's sticker book. Until the authorities finally prohibited their distribution, stickers portraying Escobar were being sold in local grocery stores for 15 cents a packet (AFP, 2012). Additionally, many documentaries¹ re-examine the history of the capo and several biographies² have been written, by journalists and victims, as well as Escobar's relatives, including his sister and brother.

John 'Popeye' Velásquez, the former right hand of Escobar, also founded a YouTube channel – 'Remorseful Popeye' – now watched by more than 100,000 subscribers. 'Popeye' spent 22 years in jail after being convicted for the murder of the presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán. However, he has also claimed responsibility for hundreds of other deaths, including many policemen. Even though the former hit man asserts that his objective is to warn young people away from crime, his channel is seen as deeply offensive by many victims. As Popeye claims: 'Everything Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria did was bad. It's important that new generations don't get fixated on the figure of Pablo Escobar and even less on mine. We should not be a model for anyone. We are bandits' (Brodzinsky, 2016). Colombia's Caracol Televisión is now producing a series based on his book *Surviving Pablo Escobar*, which will be broadcast by Netflix. This new series is

equally considered as an apology of crime and an insult for the victims, as one of the son of Popeye's victim's states:

When I switch the Television on and the first thing I see is my persecutor, the less I can say is that it is not pleasant. [...] Why do they only make tributes to the bad guys and not to the good ones? Why don't they do that with all the good guys killed by Popeye?

(Semana.com, 2017)

In a context where reality and fiction often intertwine, popular culture and violence are closely related. Narco-history represents an important source of inspiration for every sector of the Colombian mediascape and popular culture: it appears in soap operas, documentaries, web-television, movies and literature, all elements contributing to the social fabric of Medellin.

Escobar, narco-aesthetic and tourism

The celebrated Colombian painter and sculptor Fernando Botero has also contributed to publicizing the image of Pablo Escobar. Even though he publicly expressed his disgust for the drug lord, Botero represented his death in two of his paintings: *The Death of Pablo Escobar* (1999) and *Pablo Escobar Dead* (2006). The work of Fernando Botero focuses on major aspects of Latin American society, such as religion, the circus, bullfighting and the family. In such a context, violence constitutes inevitably a major theme for the artist. *Bomb Car, Massacre* and *Massacre in Colombia* are among his paintings illustrating the violence in the country.

If popular culture is certainly an important vehicle, what could be labeled as 'high culture' is also contributing to the propagation of the Pablo Escobar legacy. Yet, Botero's work is familiar to many people in Colombia and it is accessible to everyone. Several of

his sculptures are for instance exhibited in the 'plaza Botero' in Medellin's city centre. Additionally, his creations are closely related to people's everyday life. This brings into question the boundaries between 'popular' and 'high' or 'elite' culture. In any case, beyond these dichotomies, every domain of the arts contributes to diffuse the violent heritage of Colombia. The Medellin art student Ernesto Zapata won a grant in 2010 to craft a series of figurines representing Escobar with distinct identities: Robin Hood, paramilitary, politician, etc.³ After being exhibited in the Antioquia Museum, also hosting numerous Botero paintings, the figurines were put on sale; in the end, buyers were mainly foreign tourists. Moreover, the artist offered several of his creations to families living in the popular neighbourhood commonly called 'barillo Pablo Escobar'.⁴ Here again the distinction between 'popular' and 'elite' culture is very blurred.

Many shops and street vendors in Medellin propose goodies and clothes featuring the image of Escobar (Figure 5.1). Furthermore, Escobar's son, who changed his name to Santiago Marroquin (replacing his former name Juan Pablo Escobar Henao), after moving to Argentina, founded a clothing brand in 2010 called 'Escobar Henao'.⁵ Under the slogan 'in peace we trust', t-shirts depicting mug shots of his father are sold on the Internet and in various boutiques around the world. These products are not available anywhere in Colombia.

Some local scholars and artists (Rincón, 2009; Henao, 2015) have introduced the notion of a 'narco-aesthetic', going so far as to link the current boom of plastic surgery in Medellin to the history of the drug trade and the tastes of the dealers, influenced by their trips in the United States, for blonde and buxom women. Henao (2015), in her photographic work 'Beauties', explores how these social factors modified the perception of the Colombian female body. According to her, the 1980s and 1990s changed the image

of Medellín's women, from strong figures of 'mothers' and 'hard workers' to very materialistic representations:

Drug lords would visit the US to conduct drug deals and return with images of beauty that they'd seen on prostitutes there: blonde and voluptuous, with thin noses.

Back home, they had the money to transform any woman into that canon of beauty.

(Henaó, 2015)

Moreover, this process is described in a famous novel that also generated a television series – *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (*Without Tits There Is No Paradise*) – which documents what Rincón (2009, p. 160) describes as follows: 'To be successful in Colombia, women have to be females and mothers [*mamacitas* in Spanish], use silicone and be fearless in bed' (translated from Spanish by the author). For this Colombian scholar, narco is not only a business, but an aesthetic embedded in Colombian history and culture, which manifests itself in music, television, language and architecture.

Violence and narcos are also significantly present in Medellín's tourism sector. Since 2007, an increasing number of guides have been offering what are often labeled as 'Pablo tours'. Guides generally bring tourists – almost all foreigners – to various sites associated with the capo: his grave in Montesacro Cemetery and abandoned buildings, like the one where he was killed. These tours are promoted by private entrepreneurs. Public bodies involved in tourism tend to distance themselves from the practice, which they consider harms the international image of the city (Giraldo, 2014; Naef, 2015). Tensions also arise from the fact that the most popular of these tours is based on a partnership between tourist guides and Roberto Escobar, the brother of Pablo Escobar and the former bookkeeper of the Medellín cartel. After his release from prison in 2003, Escobar's brother transformed the first floor of his house (a former Escobar hideout) into a museum for the memory of

his brother. This museum is very popular within the emerging backpacker's scene; many young travellers are eager to take a souvenir picture with Roberto Escobar in front of a poster showing the two brothers as wanted and offering a \$10 million reward.

Furthermore, some peripheral neighbourhoods of Medellin, generally built by war-displaced people, are also becoming part of the tourist companies' proposed programs. 'Comuna tours' (Naef, 2016) referring to the common designation of these urban areas as '*comunas*', explore specific parts of these neighbourhoods, looking at their violent past, but also at contemporary issues of violence, setting them against the creativity and resilience of their inhabitants. These tours generally offer a narrative closely associated with the urban transformation and social investments that can be seen in the city. They are thus an appropriate tool in relaying the public authorities' promotional discourse on the 'miracle' of Medellin: a place shifting from 'the most violent to the most innovative city in the world' (Naef, 2016, p. 1).

Theoretical underpinnings: violence, tourism and popular culture

The state certainly plays an important role in the memorialization of violence, by its implementation of institutions such as memorial museums and official commemorations, but many initiatives also flourish in civil society and popular culture. A clear-cut distinction between state and civil society-supported projects seems reductive, as does opposing a popular and an elite way of remembering. Some initiatives instigated by civil society may win the support of the public authorities. In this context, artistic and memorial projects born in popular neighbourhoods can end up in a state museum; private and small-scale tourism projects can become successful enterprises. Memory of violence in Colombia is thus fragmented, produced by various sources and represented in many different, and often conflicting, ways.

Violence and its fascinating aura significantly impacts popular culture, as well as the whole social fabric, and the tourism sector increasingly cashes in on it. Both tourism and popular culture are important vehicles of representations of this dissonant heritage. However, when a traumatic past is at issue, memory studies still tend to overlook this area, focusing instead on more legitimate institutions of memory, such as museums and official memorials. This analysis seeks to bridge the gap, and contribute to deconstructing the general opposition between ‘popular’ and ‘official’ (or elitist) memorialization.

Research related to violence and popular culture is growing in Latin America, especially relating to Mexico (Aguilera, 2002; Polit-Dueñas, 2013) Colombia (Cobo, 2008; Rincón, 2009; Polit-Dueñas, 2013; Naef, in preparation; 2015) and Brazil (Larkins, 2015). In Rio de Janeiro, Larkins (2015, p. 212), demonstrates how popular culture represents an effective vehicle for the diffusion of representations related to violence and drugs: ‘virtual spaces of infotainment and leisure are increasingly militarized, one finds that violence circulates through all of us, as news, movies, games, photos, fashion and even smartphone applications’. It is first of all important to examine how popular culture is defined and what it encompasses. The notion of popular culture, often labelled ‘pop culture’, has been widely explored in various disciplines such as literature (Freccero, 1999), rhetoric (Brummett, 2014), sociology (Mouchtouris, 2007; Delaney & Madigan, 2016) and anthropology (Buhle, 1987; Danesi, 2007; Long & Robinson, 2009). Popular culture has various meanings and there is still a lack of consensus on what it does and does not include. (Long & Robinson, 2009) Scholars usually agree that it is largely determined by people’s everyday activities, like food, sport or language, and it is disseminated and fed by the mass media, including vehicles such as television, radio, the Internet and printed materials (Brummett, 2014). As stated above, popular culture is often opposed to the notion of ‘high culture’ or ‘elite culture’: the fine arts, opera, theatre and

other elements not mass produced and primarily associated with the upper socio-economic classes.

Delaney (2007, p. 2) defines popular culture as ‘the ‘items (products) and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or widely accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time.’ Popular culture would thus participate in forging a collective identity and a place image. As in Assmann and Czaplicka’s (1995) conceptualization of memory – a set of shared socialization patterns defining a collective identity – it can also create alternative ways of perceiving narco-cultures, rooted in real locations of violence as well as in imaginary places created in fiction (Polit-Dueñas, 2013). Yet, if popular culture enables large heterogeneous masses of people to identify collectively, some elements widely diffused by mass media can also clash strongly with other competing representations. Cultural productions closely associated with ambiguous figures such as the narcos, especially iconic ones like Pablo Escobar, certainly serve as an example of representations widely disseminated locally and internationally, but rejected by a large part of the population.

The narcos and the miracle of Medellin

The urban armed conflict in Medellin in the last decades profoundly marked its social fabric. For many Colombians, unfortunately, violence is part of everyday life. This violent heritage is significantly integrated in popular culture, determined, as Brummett (2014) states, by people’s everyday life. Thus, many novels, movies, songs or soap operas focus on the gangs and cartels involved in drug trafficking. As Rincón (2009, p. 162) cynically claims:

The truth is that in *Narco.lombia*, without tits, weapons and money, there is no happiness. The society enjoys the taste of mafia, the truth of silicone and the ethic

of the gun. Therefore, our literary, artistic, musical and television fiction; our language, our architecture and our tastes; our politics and our president celebrate, without decency, the values of narco. And, most extraordinary of all, medias, journalists and Colombians, we do not see anything bad in it.

(Translated from Spanish by the author)

Narco-culture is present in every segment of Colombian society: entertainment and tourism, but also architecture (Cobo, 2008), language (Salazar, 1990) and aesthetics (Rincón, 2009). The commodification process that accompanies tourism and popular culture significantly contributes to trivializing the violence described in these practices and productions. In the case of Colombian and Mexican *narco-novelas*, Polit-Dueñas (2013, p. 109) remarks that reality can often be stranger than fiction: ‘Death is described in repetitive and shocking ways; it eventually becomes overly exaggerated. In the end, violence stands like a wry grin, provoking laughter, like in a Quentin Tarantino movie.’ These narratives thus participate in the spreading of simplified and unverified facts about this violent history; propagating myths that often clash in a memorial arena where victims and perpetrators still closely cohabit.

In 2013, ProColombia, the public–private entity in charge of tourism promotion, launched an advertisement campaign depicting the country with the slogan: ‘Colombia is magical realism.’ Inspired partly by the work of the Colombian Nobel literature prizewinner, Gabriel García Márquez, magical realism encompasses diverse areas, such as literature, cinema and painting. It refers to the presence of irrational elements in a realistic historical and geographical setting. As demonstrated by the elements promoted, ProColombia associates magical realism with pristine beaches, wild jungle and mysterious indigenous traditions. The same representations occur in the field of popular

culture with the release in 2015 of the film *Majia salvaje* (*Wild Magical*). Based on the exploration of the country's rich biodiversity, this documentary is now the highest-grossing cinematographic production in Colombian history, with more than 2 million tickets sold.

On the other hand, even if their history is certainly not promoted by tourism officials, former members of the Medellin Cartel were also frequently referred to as 'magicians', due to their ability to amass huge amounts of money in a very short time. Netflix introduces *Narcos* to the spectator like this: 'Magical realism is defined as what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. There is a reason magical realism was born in Colombia'. Two opposing versions of magical realism are confronted here, illustrating once again the dissonant heritage associated with Colombia's difficult past.

A similar dynamic can be observed in Medellin, when the violent history and the urban development of the city are the issues: On one side, public stakeholders promote the city through discourses praising its transformation and all the related social initiatives, looking toward the future, with a blind eye on its traumatic past. On the other side, private entrepreneurs propel foreigners in the footsteps of Pablo Escobar, presenting a sombre picture of the city, while acknowledging its difficult heritage. In the middle, inhabitants find themselves torn between memory and forgetting, between the narco-past and the bright future of the Medellin miracle, both narratives presenting a mythical and simplified vision of their city.

Implications for popular culture tourism: the commodification of violence

Popular culture and tourism significantly contribute to the commodification of violence and to the simplification of Medellín's history. Nuances are often screened out by the spectacular, romantic and glamorous vision of the narcos produced by the different sectors involved: cinema, television, literature, tourism, fashion, etc. Furthermore, this performative violence tends to divert public attention from the real-life social context that makes it possible (Larkins, 2015). As is often the case when a violent history is commodified, Manichean representations emerge in an arena where memories are still traumatic and disputed. The TV show, *Narcos*, despite its intention to portray the tortured minds and the mistakes of the heroes (for instance when agent Murphy beats up a business man in the airport due to a serious burn-out), situates its characters firmly in the categories of 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. In this dark representation of Colombia, locals are mainly hit men, compromised politicians and corrupt policemen or sexy and mischievous women, while the two American agents are represented as heroes struggling to remain sane in this savage context.

However, as it has already been underlined, because popular culture is about people's everyday life, people in Medellín talk about symbols of the narcos' violence as elements that constitute part of this everyday life (Polit Dueñas, 2013). Thus, daily life in a country still plagued with drug trafficking and violence represents an important source of inspiration for entrepreneurs in the fields of popular culture. This context contributes to create a mythical vision of narco-glamour and leads to the trivialization of violence. Colombia's violent history is simplified, notwithstanding the comment of agent Murphy in the trailer for the second season of *Narcos*: 'If there is something I learned in the narco world, it is that things are always more complicated than you think'.⁶

According to Long and Robinson (2009, p. 103), soap operas, like documentaries or sports broadcasts, ‘contribute significantly in shaping daily and weekly leisure patterns and provide subjects for diversion, reflections and discussion’. Nevertheless, far from diffusing consensual representations, these elements trigger numerous conflicts and tensions in a memorial arena where victims, witnesses, journalists, politicians, actors and criminals cohabit. An important source of friction is related to the fact that many characters – Pablo Escobar, Griselda Blanco, Popeye, Don Berna,⁷ etc. – are historical figures who left a traumatic imprint on Colombian society, especially in Medellín. Additionally, some of their victims are also occasionally incorporated into the series, played by actors or even appearing in documentary footage. Depending on how they portray these figures, some popular culture productions can spark harsh controversies. *Narcos*, *El patron del mal* and other large-scale productions represent key illustrations of the way dissonant representations and discourses clash in a society still traumatized by an unfinished armed conflict.

Moreover, some former criminals like Roberto Escobar and Popeye are now involved in the management of businesses in the tourism sector or in areas of popular culture. These can be financially profitable, while serving at the same time as a vehicle expressing a particular viewpoint. Roberto Escobar is not only a touristic resource; he is also a memorial entrepreneur (Naef, in preparation). In this context, victims can be even more uncomfortable with some of the representations of their heritage. Yet, on the other hand, the diversity of narco-productions in Medellín’s mediascape and touristscape also reflects a form of pacification in the social tissue of the city. As the blogger Aparicio Garcia (2015) puts it: ‘The mere fact that a show like this [*Narcos*] can exist is evidence of how much things have changed since that time, both in the United States and in Colombia.’

To conclude this analysis, it is stated that opposing popular culture to ‘high’ or ‘elite’ culture is more restrictive than productive. Projects and productions evolve in time and their status (and those of their producers) shifts from one context to another. Plus, the designation of ‘popular’ and ‘high’ can often imply a normative dimension, which can influence the public, as well as researchers. The study of narco-culture, far from being anecdotal and frivolous, provides important and concrete insights into contemporary Latin American society.

Notes

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¹ See, for instance, *The Two Escobars*, *The King of Coke*, *Hunting Escobar*, *Pablo Escobar: Angel or Demon?* and *Sins of My Father*.

² See, for instance, *Killing Pablo*, *Pablo Escobar mi padre*, *Escobar: The Inside Story of Pablo Escobar, the World's Most Powerful Criminal*, *Memory of Pablo Escobar*, *El Verdadero Pablo*.

³ <http://cargocollective.com/estebanzapataartista/Pablo-in-Commerce> (accessed 26 October 2016).

⁴ A neighbourhood in Medellin financially supported by Escobar. It was built in the 1980s to host families living in deprived conditions.

⁵ www.escobarhenao.com/es/7-t-shirts-poder-poder (accessed 26 October 2016).

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7eINhHwgBU&feature=youtu.be (accessed 27 October 2016).

⁷ Diego Bejarana, commonly known as 'Don Berna', started working for the Medellin Cartel and then became one of the leaders of United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia paramilitary group. He was finally extradited in 2008 to a jail in the United States. This

historical figure has been included in different productions such as the second season of *Narcos*.