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NARCO-AESTHETIC AND NARCO-CULTURE IN NARCO-LOMBIA

Omar Rincón

"Narco" does not just have to do with the drug trade and trafficking; It is also an aesthetic which crosses and overlaps with the culture and history of Colombia and today it manifests in music, television, language and architecture. There is such a thing as a narco-aesthetic that is flamboyant, exaggerated, and grandiose, of expensive cars, silicone and ranches, in which beautiful women intermingle with the Virgin and the mother. This article argues that the narco-aesthetic reflects Colombian tastes as well as those of popular world cultures. It is not poor taste. Rather, it is another aesthetic, common in underprivileged communities that align themselves with modernity and have only found a way to exist in the world through money.

"Narco," or drug trafficker, is often talked about as an ethical approach, but truthfully it is an aesthetic. The truth is, narcos annoy us with their tastes, but their money helps us. But what are we to do when a whole society behaves like narcos? Assume that we are envious of them because they have the money and audacity to show off their flashy, exaggerated and disproportionate taste. Assume that they were able to elevate their taste to fit with the social status of success. Recognize that they could care less about us, the supposedly enlightened ones. They don't pay us any mind and that pisses us off. I'll say it straight away, to criticize the narco-aesthetic is an act of bourgeois arrogance. Therefore, this is not a critique, but it is not a celebration either. It is a true account.

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■ Cocalombia

Charly Garcia came to Bogotá in 2005 and upset our *light* nationalism when he said: "Greetings, Cocalombia ['coke'-lombia]." It hurt our pride. The good ladies of *Colombia is passion*, the campaign to sell the nation's brand abroad, were very offended. Now they have placed stickers in the bathrooms of restaurants which say that "speaking badly of Colombia is unsightly and in very bad taste." *Light* morality! The incident with Charly was a provocation and a wake-up call: We are the nation of cocaine and narco tastes. We can't help that this is what we are.

Acknowledging this brings us embarrassment, shame and even anger. And this is because we Colombians are very concerned with our reputation. The truth is, we are a country branded as narco not because of cocaine but for how we all, from the president to whoever is writing this, behave and live. Narco is an aesthetic, but also a way of thinking, but also an ethic of quick wins, but also an excessive taste, but also a culture of flamboyance. A culture of doing whatever it takes to escape poverty, a public affirmation of "why bother being rich if not to show it off?" There is only one way to adopt this culture: to have money, weapons, silicone women, loud music, gaudy clothing, extravagant housing and an eye for cars and objects. Oh... and Catholic morals!

■ Narco-lombia

These days (May 2009) in Colombia about 70% of the population is very happy to be governed by President Álvaro Uribe. And rightfully, he is the symbol, icon and depiction of Narco-lombia. A taste that, in the words of the writer Héctor Abad Faciolince, considers the following an expression of what it means to be Colombian: cars, ranches, cement, horses, gaudy buildings, loud music, exotic fashions and flashy technology. If we observe President Uribe in action, we find that these are the values he promotes; he has even said that reading books and watching movies is for the bourgeois of Bogotá. He acknowledges that he does not have time to read and that the last time he went to the movie theater was at the age of seven, to see *The Lone Ranger*. Since then, he has believed that the Lone Ranger is out in the mountains of Colombia.

Colombian journalist Juan Fernando Tabares published the book *Estoy cargado de tigre*¹, which is a collection of 400 controversial statements made by President Uribe in his political life,

¹ Intermedio, Bogotá, 2007.



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Roberto Cubillas (Buenos Aires, 1968) studied comics, drawing, engraving and painting. Since 1996 he has worked in graphic design and illustrated children's books. He has illustrated books by authors such as Laura Devetach, Silvia Schujer, Griselda Gambaro, David Wapner and Alberto Pez, among others, some of whom have won awards from Alija (Argentina) and the Fundación Banco del Libro (Venezuela). In 2003 he presented *Un par de cuentos*, his first solo exhibition at the Centro Cultural Recoleta (Buenos Aires), and he has participated in several collective exhibitions.

most of which were given in an energetic, heated or explosive tone. The book features quotes such as "I am not everyone's cup of whiskey," or what he said to a group of young evangelicals about sex: "You have to save the good stuff for after marriage," or what he said to one of his royal subjects: "I am really pissed at you and if I see you, you're going to get it in the face, faggot." At least he is authentic and honest. He doesn't even quote García Márquez.

In 1995, popular journalist and writer Gustavo Álvarez Gardeazábal wrote in the magazine *Número* that "drug trafficking was a cultural revolution" that required "a Napoleon to consolidate it (...) someone to keep order (...) and legitimize the changing values, that change from the morality of sin to the morality of money." And Uribe arrived and did us one better, because he combined the morality of sin with the morality of money, (con)fusing the two ideologies. He is morality. He and his values are the truth above all law and Constitution. He is not worried about money. He has his children and his collaborators for that, the new millionaires in Colombia.

A "pretty" long time ago, to use the diminutives that he loves so much, when Uribe was still in school, as Héctor Abad Faciolince writes in his beautifully written testimony *El olvido que seremos* – the best-selling and most highly applauded literary work of the Colombian 21st century, which is in its 20th Edition – young Uribe attempted to seduce and woo Faciolince's sister, and she rejected him. "For Vicky", by the very short Álvaro Uribe, who was completely taken with her, but she was not with him, because he seemed very serious and, above all, very crabby. "Since you won't have anything to do with me," said the man once, "I'll change that." And he named his best mare "Vicky," because he liked horses more than anything, and he said "Now, I ride Vicky every week." ² This brief story demonstrates that narco-culture has always been with us, especially in the Antioquia region, and that it is authentic, just as our president is.

■ Narco-culture

The same writer, essayist and columnist of *El Espectador*, Héctor Abad Faciolince, asked this question in *Número* magazine in 1995: "Are we witnessing the narcotization of style in Colombia?" And he answers his question with no, as narcos have simply put the Colombian bourgeoisie's bad taste into action. "They have always

² Planet, Bogotá, 2006, p. 149.

wanted to have the same things as the narcos (...) We would like to give narcos a cultural monopoly on bad taste. That's not what is going on. Their bad taste is a national flaw." In 1995, with this text by Abad Faciolince, the study of narco-culture was born in Colombia, about the roots of an aesthetic marked by two tastes: the new American rich and the rich Colombian mountaineer or *antioqueño*.

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And it is so "authentically" Colombian because it demonstrates that us Colombians find fulfillment in a weekend on a ranch, because there is nothing we enjoy more than giving orders and having someone to obey them. Another value of narco-culture: power and giving orders. "While the bourgeois want to become powerful by getting rich, we want to become powerful by giving orders," writes Mauricio Garcia, a professor at la Universidad Nacional and a columnist for *El Espectador*³.

Abad Faciolince declared Colombia the territory of narco-aesthetic and hitman culture: "narco-aesthetic" for the tastes of the "reigning" powerful druglords in the business, and "hitman" for the way young people kill: Of course, this is subject to hierarchies. It's hard to imagine hitman becoming a druglord, or a druglord becoming a hitman.

And what is narco-aesthetic? It is made up of exaggeration, shaped by the grand, the loud, the gaudy; An aesthetic of objects and architecture; scapulars and the Virgin; music turned all the way up, all the time, silver narco-toyotas, showing off money. In a nutshell, the "obstinacy of abundance, the high volume, the ostentation of objects (...) The power to flaunt." Alonso Salazar, author of the most important book about narco-culture, *No nacimos pa' semilla*, published in 1990, which today is required reading in every school in Colombia, says the issue consists of "looking good, patent leather, pretty girls." An aesthetic made up of a collage of "generous Buddhas, Chinese porcelains, marble statues, Louis XV furniture, fluorescent paints... and *galofardos* (handsome lovers of Antillean music, tango and fights for honor... and revenge)." ⁴

And what is *la sicaresca* [hitman novel]? A new type of story that depicts our fascination with assassins, gruesomeness, and excess. The *sicario* [hitman] is the young man who

³ "Gente para mandar" in *El Espectador*, 8/5/2009.

⁴ *No nacimos pa' semilla. La cultura de las bandas juveniles de Medellín*, Cinep, Bogotá, 1990.

makes a living killing for pay, who lives fast, with a lot of adrenaline, but dies young, who takes lives and risks their own life all to have something to leave for their *cucha* (their mother). A *sicario* is someone whose job is to kill, who prays to the Virgin, who adores his mother, who has a pure bride and a hot mistress. A *sicario* is someone who claims that "there is only one mother because any son of a bitch can be a father." Essayist Guadi Calvo explains how the hitman novel is the young people's method to "kill in order to get clothes, their mother's house, a fridge, a TV, and to make sure their mother is taken care of after they are gone. The merging of the mother and the Virgin is sacred to the *sicario*. The union is synonymous with love, surrender and adversity."⁵ A *sicario* is the type of young man who is a product of narco-culture. "This culture of death has generated its own ceremonies, based on rural traditions and superstitions," discusses Calvo. He tells how "these young men thank the Virgin when they successfully kill a man" while they "shield their body with scapulars covering the *sicario*'s weak spots: The heart that feels, the arms that shoot, the feet that run and support him on his motorcycle." A *sicario* is dangerous, but disposable. Attractive and exciting.

This hitman novel aesthetic is apparent in *La virgen de los sicarios* (Fernando Vallejo, 1994) and *Rosario Tijeras* (Jorge Franco, 1999), successful literary works which both became successful films. Two other fundamental *sicaresca* works include the previously mentioned *No nacimos pa' semilla* (Alonso Salazar, 1990) and *El pelaito que no duró nada* (Víctor Gaviria, 1991). "Killing someone or dying is all part of the game of being Colombian. You could be killed by the boss's orders, but you could also be killed for turning the music up too loud, or taking the wrong street," concludes Calvo. The most prestigious poet, writer and essayist in Colombia, William Ospina, describes the sentimentality of this phenomenon. He writes that "we watch these young people kill and die in an impulsive, thoughtless and meaningless dance, and we cannot even hate them, because we they seem to be killing each other just as innocently as they lose themselves in love or music."⁶ Later, many writers attempted to take advantage of the hitman novel formula: writing a young character, exploiting the force of their language and their nature as an ephemeral and marginal hero, painting life as transitory and fast-paced while enjoying the rapture of a sensational narrative with a realistic tone. As readers of *sicaresca*, we are fascinated with marginalized young characters who play with danger and could feasibly kill us. We enjoy what we believe we are not!

⁵ "La Sicaresca como una de las bellas artes" in <www.caratula.net/Archivo/N17-0407/Secciones/Cine/cine.html> date consulted: May 2009.

⁶ «La virgen de los sicarios en el cine» in *Número* no. 26, n.d.

To be clear, *sicaresca* is an aesthetic of youth, it is an epic of immediate success, of living fast and dying young. Narco-aesthetic is another thing altogether. It is made up of the more adult tastes expressed by narcotraffickers, and it is Colombia's latest national brand.

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■ Narco-language

Narco-lombia has its own dialect which inhabits the language. The Colombian colloquial language is full of *parlache*, (from *parlar*, to speak, in *el parce*, the corner). In their book, *El parlache*, researchers José Ignacio Henao and Luz Stella Castañeda collected more than 1,500 terms which make up this Paisa-Colombian way of speaking. These expressions are necessary in order to refer to weapons, money, sexuality, drugs, boredom and, above all, death. It is its own dialect formed to help us understand each other. It started in the poorer classes with hitmen (who kill for money), then moved on to *traquetos* (mid-level narcos). Now this dialect is used by young people who grow up in Colombia. "*¡Qué hubo parce!*", "*No sea faltón*", "*Suavena*", "*Sisas gonorrea*."

Alonso Salazar, already mentioned as the author of *No nacimos pa' semilla* and current mayor of Medellín, says that "a subverted language" is spoken, characterized for its productivity of expressions around death. "A mixture of jargon learned from tango, gringo *slang* and local verbal presdigitation." The dialect took root in Medellín and Salazar, researcher, journalist in the 90s and the current mayor, defines it as "a language that is playful and profane at the same time, rising up from the areas of exclusion." It is a way of speaking that calls murder victims *regalos* [gifts], females *nenorras* [pet name *nená* combined with the derogatory female suffix *-orra*] and which refers to a civilian with the disrespectful term *gonorrea* [gonorrhoea]. And if you didn't catch all that, here is a short glossary*:

A la efe [to the F]: for sure, to the end.

Amurao [nervous, stressed]: sad, bored, imprisoned, desperate from having run out of drugs.

⁷ Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, 2001.

*glossary is shown with the *parlache* term italicized, the literal Spanish word meaning in brackets, and the contextual meaning in after the colon. Ex: *Parlache* [to speak in the corner]: slang originating in Colombian drug trafficking circles

Bajar [to lower, to bring down]: to steal, to kill.
Banderiar [to wave a flag]: to put in evidence, to point out, to cause trouble.
Cachiruzo: Marijuana.
Chumbimba: Bullet.
Enamorar [to woo, to charm]: to hate, to go after (somebody)
Gaga [stutterer]: machine gun.
Gonorrea [gonorrhoea]: Despicable person, insult.
Gorzobia: Insult.
Me piso [I'm stepping]: I'm going.
Muñeco [doll, dummy]: Corpse.
Parcero [partner]: friend, buddy.
Picado [chopped]: pretentious, arrogant.
Pirobo [fucker]: homosexual, insult.
Sisas: yes, affirmative.
Tamal [tamale]: gram of cocaine.
Tartamuda [stutterer]: machine gun.
Torcido [crooked]: traitor.
Traqueto: hitman, thug, drug dealer who has traveled to the United States to deal drugs.
Video [video]: event.
Visajiar [to make a face]: To spy, to give somebody a funny look.

■ Narco-architecture

Narco means to have money, a weapon, a silicone woman or a powerful man, to disrespect rules, to use slang, to display emotional stress and flaunt everything you have. When Chepe Santacruz, a narco from Cali, was not allowed to enter Club Colombia, an establishment for the so-called "high society," had an identical club built for his family, and so was able to buy high society. The legendary Pablo Escobar built an open-air zoo with African animals. The former governor of the Department of Cundinamarca collects elephant heads in one of the most expensive mansions in Bogotá. President Uribe showcases his governing ability by riding a horse while drinking a Colombian coffee without spilling a drop.

Narco-architecture has already reached the 41st National Salon of Colombian Artists in 2008 and 2009. It is thought to be clearly identifiable through certain types of shapes, colors and styles. The architecture of narco-culture is considered to be synonymous with popular tastes, excess, of copying and appearances, luxury and Miami, as seen in the Venezuelan Luis Molina-Pantin's photographs in his exhibit "La narco-arquitectura y sus contribuciones

a la comunidad Cali-Bogotá, Colombia»⁸. Thus, narco-architecture is not the taste for those with "enlightened" tastes.

But the person who defines and conceptualizes this phenomenon is Adriana Cobo, an architect who works as a professor at the School of Architecture and Construction at the University of Greenwich, London. Her essay "¿Es el ornamento un delito?" has become fundamental. Cobo defines the narco-aesthetic as "ostentatious, exaggerated, disproportionate and laden with symbolism which seeks to give status and legitimize violence." She claims that in architecture this aesthetic is characterized by "facades of Greek gates lined with marble and gold lattices, garish cars, men draped in gold chains and women swollen with silicone." ⁹

The interesting thing about Cobo is that she moves from prejudice to analysis and proposes that rather than viewing the architecture of drug trafficking "as a group of illegal and tasteless buildings," we see it as part of the "popular tastes, view it positively and emulate it, ensuring its continuity in time and in cities;" a new kind of symbolic link, of a new "social cohesion system." This "ornate, ostentatious and disproportionate aesthetic" is a middle ground for Colombians who seek status and recognition, which is only given via money and ornamentation.

Why have it if you can't show it off? Cobo believes that in Columbia's case "symbolism and iconography are important," as well as "the strategy of copying," and that therefore the architecture of drug trafficking has done nothing different compared to traditional Colombian architecture. What's more, this aesthetic has transformed itself. Now, says Cobo, "the strategy of ostentation for camouflage has changed, to the extent that illegal drug trade has demanded diversification, ramification, and 'sophistication.' Ornamentation has given way to smooth surfaces and aluminium shutters which replicate the 'modern' homes of prominent young executives of large companies, which in turn replicate houses found in architectural magazines from Europe or the United States. We can no longer tell who is copying who (...)."

⁸ V. "El objeto de la narco-arquitectura en Molina-Pantin" in *Analitica.com*, 11/9/2007, <www.analitica.com/va/arte/dossier/7537754.asp>.

⁹ In [*esferapublica*], 8/4/2006, http://esferapublica.org/portal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=80&Itemid=53>.

The architecture of drug trafficking is the architecture of Colombian popular culture, a demonstration of who we are, an iconic account of ourselves, a search for public acceptance through copying and excess ■

Once again, we reach the same point, the architecture of drug trafficking is the architecture of Colombian popular culture, a demonstration of who we are, an iconic account of ourselves, a search for public acceptance through copying and excess. We are authentic when we are Narco-lombia.

■ Narco-music

We Colombians carry a Mexican *ranchera* in our hearts. When we sing in the colombian style, we call the genre "*música del despecho* [heartbreak/rebound music]," in which men love and weep. And when we sing of drug trafficking it is called a "*corrido prohibido* [banned ballad]." *Corridos* [ballads] which mix *ranchera* with *cumbia* and create a symbolic territory using a northern Mexican *corrido*. This is how the true account of Colombian drug trafficking is born.

Mexican researcher Miguel Olmos Aguilera explains that

Today the symbols representing our national hero have changed. The indomitable, but benevolent figure of the "traditional" character becomes the narco-hero, proud and arrogant. The horses are replaced by trucks in lyrics referencing "a red car", a "grey Grand Marquis," a "golden suburban" or a "black Lincoln".

The *corrido* about drug trafficking revisits old themes like challenging an enemy, lawlessness and the betrayal of a beautiful woman. The new lyrics are adapted to the old *corrido*, quickly finding links between contemporary drug traffickers and revolutionary heroes.¹⁰

Popular cultures produce new rhythms, stories and emotions. Therefore, a simplified form of *cumbia* mixes with another *ranchero*-style *cumbia* which nods to the Mexican *corrido*. And, a charming and seductive musical tradition is born. One in which we sing of a love full of bullets, manliness and betrayals. One where dancing entails gluing oneself to the hottest girl of the moment. *¡Te queremos, Rosario!* [We love you, Rosario!]

The aesthetic of *corridos prohibidos* is an expression of the narco-latino tastes that we would rather hide but which come out when we have money. An aesthetic

¹⁰ "El corrido de narcotráfico y la música popular en el norte de México," cited in <www.lajornadamichoacan.com.mx/2007/12/03/index.php?section=cultura&article=013n1cul>.

made up of rural nostalgia and sepia-toned ColMex (Colombia-Mexico) worlds, modern cars (BMW's, Toyotas and 4 x 4s), Miami (hip huggers and jewelry) and other bodies, some of which are more rounded and tight (skinny models for the rich!). Finally, with our homegrown Gringo-Mex Marlboro dream, we find that Latin imagery in which popular culture mixes with narco-culture, mixed with gringo, mixed with Mexican, mixed with Colombian, mixed with Caribbean excess. Finally, we can listen to the *cantina* music we like, which sings of heartbreak and bravery.

The philosophy, stories, and characters of narcoculture are sung. Philosophy that celebrates the tragic destiny met by children of social injustice and poverty, political corruption and the contempt for the rich, the lack of parents and the love of women, the patriotic pride and the USA's guilt. They are the same stories that appear in newspapers, but in their other versions as brave and loyal heroes; as beings born of the people and fighters for the people; as Robin Hoods who give back what the laws and the government take away. The stories begin by narrating the cultivation, the preparation process, the export, the celebration of the mockery of authorities and, above all, how somebody with money lives and what it is used for: women, cars, weapons and alcohol.

*Uno venía de Florencia (Morelia)
el otro de Santander (Novolato)
salieron de madrugada
después de cerrar el trato.
¿Cuánta traían? Nadie lo sabe
pero el carro iba cargado
(dicen que era un guato).*

[One came from Florencia (Morelia)]
[the other from Santander (Novolato)]
[left early in the morning]
[after closing the deal.]
[How much were they carrying? Nobody knows]
[but the truck was loaded (they say it was a wrap*)]
*a *guato* is a large quantity of cocaine

The song is called "Los cocodrilos," with the Mexican version in parentheses. One single symbolic territory: drug trafficking. Two local versions: Colombia and Mexico. A single value: The bravery of the drug trafficker.

In Colombia the most famous song is "Nadie es eterno en el mundo", by Darío Gómez:

*Nadie es eterno en el mundo
ni teniendo un corazón
que tanto siente y suspire
por la vida y el amor.*

[No one is eternal in the world]
[not even having a heart]
[that feels and breathes so much]
[for life and love.]

*Todo lo acaban los años
dime qué te llevas tú*

[Everything ends with years]
[tell me what you walk away with]

*si con el tiempo no queda
ni la tumba, ni la cruz.*

[if with time not even]
[the grave or the cross remain.]

*Cuando ustedes me estén despidiendo
con el último adiós de este mundo
no me lloren, que nadie es eterno
nadie vuelve del sueño profundo.*

[When you are bidding me farewell]
[with my last goodbye in this world]
[don't cry for me, for no one is eternal]
[no one returns from deep sleep.]

Everything must be experienced in the present, nothing can be left for after death. A whole philosophy of staying in the moment. This is what narco-culture is. And in this context of celebrating narco-culture, one of the most famous *corridos* is "La pista secreta" by Los Tucanes de Tijuana.

<i>(«¿Qué ubele, quién habla?» «Jefe, nos descubrieron la pista secreta»)</i>	["What's going on, who's talking?"] ["Boss, they found the secret trail"]
<i>Sacó una bolsa de polvo y se dio tres muy aprisa le subió tiro a su escuadra y se fajó la camisa les dijo a sus compañeros: «Hay problemas en la pista».</i>	[He took out a bag of powder and quickly took three hits] [he raised his rifle up in front of his squad and tucked in his shirt] [he told his companions, "we have a problem on the trail."]
<i>Procedente de Colombia una avioneta llegaba a la sierra sinaloense donde iba a ser descargada pero la pista secreta la Judicial encontraba.</i>	[A plane from Colombia arrived] [at the Sinaloan sierra where it was going to be unloaded] [but the police found the secret trail.]
<i>Y la estaban descargando cuando se oyó una sirena. Los narcos se reportaron, «Jefe tenemos problemas». El Jefe dice: «Hagan frente, voy para allá, no se muevan».</i>	[and while they were unloading it they heard a siren.] [The narcos said, "Boss we have a problem."] [The boss said, "Stand your ground, I'm on my way, don't move."]
<i>Empezaron los disparos al llegar la Judicial cayeron dos traficantes, quedaban cuatro nomás pero cuando llegó el Jefe no quedó ni un federal.</i>	[When the police arrived, shots were fired] [two traffickers fell, there were only four left] [but once the Boss arrived not one policeman remained standing]
<i>«Señor, aquí está la carga», dijeron los colombianos «entréguenos el dinero porque ya nos retiramos». «Pues que tengan un buen viaje» y al infierno los mandaron.</i>	["Sir, here is the shipment," said the Colombians,] ["hand over the money because we're getting out of here."] ["Well, have a good trip" and he sent them into hell.]
<i>Ninguno era Judicial, eran puros bajadores se disfrazaron de leyes como en varias ocasiones junto con los colombianos hacían sus operaciones.</i>	[None of them were police, they were nothing but scam artists] [they were disguised as the law as has happened several times] [they were working together with the Colombians.]
<i>El hombre se carcajeaba y besaba los paquetes. «Qué mansito me agarraron, no saben con quién se meten. Si no es por el pericazo no hubiera salvado el flete.»</i>	[The man laughed and kissed the packages.] [Whatever man caught me, they didn't know who they were dealing with] [If it wasn't for the hit I wouldn't have saved the cargo.]

These are *corridos prohibidos* because they celebrate and exaggerate illegal activities and the lifestyle of drug traffickers. These *corridos*, in the spirit of love and class vengeance, and with accents of TexMex exploration, build these alternative stories; contained within them is the history of this symbolic territory which defines drug trafficking, which unites Colombia and Mexico in the imagination. But in Colombia today these *corridos* have already lost their clandestine nature and are sung at full volume in any saloon, keeping in time with the video jukebox. The fastest growing channel on cable is the music channel called Radiola.tv and it features *corridos prohibidos*. Narco-lombia is becoming less ashamed of being the way it is. Because, as Uriel Henao sings, «*Prefiero un cementerio aquí en Colombia / y no una cárcel en Estados Unidos*. ["I'd rather a cemetery here in Colombia/than a prison in the United States.] / *Si me extraditan va a correr mucha sangre...*» [/ If they extradite me, a lot of blood will be spilled..."] This is a rare, strange and enigmatic type of music that instead of provoking tears, produces a sense pride. It is successful because it represents the narco-exotic Latin America that loves to purge its fears and frustrations through storytelling; That culture of excessive hatred and vengeance, which yearns for a love and power that never comes. Or perhaps because we can only tell our story through revenge.

■ Narco-TV

Colombia is better reported in its *telenovelas* [soap operas] than in its newscasts, explains the teacher Jesús Martín Barbero. The *telenovela* genre is a public sphere in which to think about ourselves as a society and it is a narrative model for understanding politics in Latin America: The pure man (supposedly we are referring to people like Chavez, Uribe, Correa, Evo...) saves the flawed woman (the deceived and vilified public). If it is so important to enjoy *telenovelas* and think about them, if that is what people watch, if they are our most well-known cultural products abroad... according to our successful *telenovelas*, what are Colombians like?

According to what is shown every night on *telenovelas*, we are a musical nation that laughs a lot and inhabits narco-culture. The striking new style, tone and texture of the Colombian *telenovela* clearly recognizes that we live in a culture of drug trafficking according to our aesthetics, values, and cultural references. We are a nation that has adopted the narco idea that anything goes when it comes to escaping poverty: breasts, weapons, corruption, drug trafficking, becoming a guerilla or vigilante (paramilitary) or working in government (see *Pasión de gavilanes*, *Sin tetas no hay paraíso*, *Los protegidos*, *El cartel*, *La guaca*, *Inversiones ABC*, y ya vienen *El capo* and *Las fantásticas*).

According to these stories, every Colombian is a narco at heart. These are stories of narco-culture that tell us that a pair of breasts is more important than working hard every day or big projects and imagination, and that we have to get ahead no matter what it takes. This great national narrative tells us that by virtue of living in this country we are all children of drug trafficking: its way of thinking (having money beats having brains), their way of acting (justice is something I can buy), of its taste and aesthetic (excess and the grotesque), of machismo (drinking, shooting guns and killing), of its mass-produced women (sinners and sluts), of its politicians (ignoramuses who obey), of its president (who would rather ride a horse than read). On TV the richness of colors, shapes, flesh and morals in our reality is naturalized.

Our star product of the 21st century is called *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* [Without Breasts There Is No Paradise], which shows that in order to be successful in Colombia women should be sexual and attractive, use silicone and not be afraid of getting into bed; a story that celebrates "kept" women who sell themselves in an exchange of sex and plastic

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surgery; publicly justifying the fact that in this country women's bodies and crimes committed by men are valid ways to escape poverty; a story of how, regardless of class, geographic region or religion, the only thing that matters is having money and enjoying oneself. Thus, the Colombian brand has silicone as its aesthetic because it

adopts everything narco as part of its culture.

Silicone breasts, *prepagos* (high class prostitutes) and bad taste belong not only to mobsters or people in the country, but they are present in all Colombian regions and social strata and they are the hallmark of its television. Breasts are all over television, because without silicone, one cannot be on TV, and cannot act in soap operas (Titavision!). The truth is, in Colombia, without breasts there is no TV. Television expresses narco tastes, the truth about silicone and the ethics of money.

In the same time that *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* was becoming a hit on Colombian TV, the most read articles in the magazine *Semana* were: «El Cartel de Mancuso», «Pasó la reforma politiquera», «El misterio de la grasa asesina», «Últimas puntadas al referendo reeleccionista», «Detrás de este proyecto se mueven demasiados intereses».

["Mancuso's Cartel," "The Reform of Politics," "The Mystery of the Fat Hitman," "Final Touches to the Reelection Referendum," "There Are Too Many Interests Behind This Project"]

María Adelaida Puerta, star of *Sin tetas no hay paraíso*, said "This series tells a true story of being consumed by the quest for a body that fits the aesthetic of drug trafficking. It is sad that girls align themselves with an aesthetic imposed by drug trafficking." Even the actress recognizes that she lives in a world of narco tastes and breasts.

Our other great 21st century product is *El cartel* (also on the channel Canal Caracol), written by former narco-trafficker Andrés López, who is now a Miami *jet setter* after this series. Andrés López told *El País* in Madrid that he was one of these two teenagers who started working in a cocaine lab one afternoon after leaving school. "My classmate was the brother of Orlando Henao Montoya, a big *narco* boss," he says. In 1986 the word for *drug trafficker* didn't even exist yet. "Back then they called them *magicians* because they had the ability to make fortunes in the blink of an eye." Andrés dislikes being called a snitch. "In this business there are no such thing as principles, friends or truths," he says¹¹.

El cartel tells us that being an informant, rat or snitch is not so bad; in fact, it allows one to "rinse" their dirty money, and that being a narco is not so despicable because life is great when you have money. The moral of this series is: The life of a narco is short but to well spent with women, cars, weapons and alcohol.

The telling of this story is daring and necessary because it recognizes that Colombia is a product of drug trafficking and that, therefore, narcos are legitimate representatives of our nation. The best thing is that it shows that in Colombia everything can be bought, that our only information and intelligence comes from rats or snitches, that we are a society of "false positives,"¹² that narco-culture is part of our national identity, and that we see nothing wrong with that. Television is another version of history; And this other version of ourselves, the narco version, is more believable.

One of the fundamental elements of popular culture, telenovelas and the melodrama that makes up narco-culture, is the theme of "overcoming", social revenge, the aspiration and celebration of the way

¹¹ Luis Beauregard: «La segunda oportunidad de 'Florecita'» in *El País*, 11/30/2008

¹² In Colombia the expression refers to young people who have been killed and portrayed as guerrillas by members of the military in order to win prizes, privileges and promotions in their military career.

of life of the poorest groups in society. So, narco-culture is the melodramatic narrative that marks Colombia today, with a high degree of "moral fitness;" Everything is justifiable, even over 200 paramilitary massacres, nearly four million people displaced by war and more than 1,200 cases of "false positives" as well as the cultural identity, since we celebrate local codes of familiar and religious cronyism as good taste, good policy, good business, and good justice. Democracy in Narco-lombia is to worship the kingpin of the moment, whether he goes by Don Pablo, Don Mario, Don Alvaro or Don Nobody.

■ Narco-lombia Reloaded

The truth is that in Narco-lombia without breasts, guns and money there is no happiness. Society enjoys narco tastes, the reality of silicone and the ethics of pistols. Our literary, artistic, musical and TV fiction; our language, architecture and tastes; our politics and president each shamelessly celebrate narco values. And the most amazing thing is that the media, journalists and Colombians all do not see anything wrong with that. We have reached para-narco-ideology.

Just to mention one last detail: We did great in soccer while América belonged to the Cali Cartel, Pablo Escobar owned el Nacional and Rodriguez Gacha owned Millonarios. In the film industry we are known for the "walk" that is the corpses are taken on in the movie *Rosario Tijeras* and for the sons of bitches and *gonorreas* in Víctor Gaviria's film *Sumas y restas*.

Those of us who think we are enlightened despise this taste, we think we know better. Perhaps the narco-aesthetic is Colombian taste, as well as that of popular cultures throughout the world. Capitalist popular culture rewards money above all else, has no literary words, no arguments, no scientific discourse... it just has extreme expressiveness, its emotional culture, its visual and gestural excess, its morality of melodramatic love and ethics of an eye for an eye, its religion that forgives but also blames and avenges...

But narco-aesthetic is not bad taste. It is just another aesthetic. Common in underprivileged communities that align themselves with modernity and have only found a way to exist in the world through money; and the money that buys everything is obtained illegally, through drug trafficking, corruption and political power. Berlusconi, like Uribe, like Chavez, like Correa, is a popular

idol, and these idols embody our people and reject collective regulation and modern values. These men are not narcos, but they practice the values of narco-culture and express the narco-aesthetic with who they are and their ways of governing... and they are alluring because they are authentic and easy to identify with. We're not the ones who are wrong! Those of us that buy into modern values are the ones who are really in the wrong! Narco-lombia exists, it is real, and it is more seductive than ever.

Bogotá, Chapinero, May 2009

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