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# Portrayal of State Institutions in Colombian Telenovelas

## The Mediation of Citizenship

**Abstract:** Telenovelas have been shown to provide a historical framework for an ample viewership in Colombia. Despite being fictional narratives, recent telenovelas have been constructed upon important historical figures or events, that become easier to appreciate and engage with by audiences than journalistic articles or documentary films. In other words, telenovelas are fundamental for the development of a public sphere, as the lure of a narrative becomes more useful for prompting discussion of contemporary issues. Exploring *En la boca del lobo* (Teleset, 2014) and *Bloque de Búsqueda* (Teleset and Sony Pictures, 2016), two Colombian telenovelas that address the war against drugs of the 1990s, we take a look at how state institutions are presented for debate in the public sphere. The two works focus on opposite protagonists, either a member of the Cali cartel who opts to betray his criminal kingpin, in the former; or the main police squad tasked with capturing, disbanding or decimating drug cartels, in the latter. This audiovisual and textual analysis of the telenovelas is contrasted with focal groups and personal interviews with audiences and creators to establish the alignment between the portrayals and the social expectations about state institutions, or to ascertain whether telenovelas sway the audience's perception of them.

The importance of telenovelas for a social construction of citizenship by bringing certain issues to the public debate in a more comprehensible matter is thus established in the intersection of the shows' representations and the interpretation given in the mediation and decoding processes of the audiences. The analysis has shown that the representation of the telenovelas of the XXI century in Colombia create a contradictory sense of identity no longer based on the construction of a national imagined community, but in the collective configuration of a weak institutional State as its core premise.

**Keywords:** audiovisual representations; contemporary history; Colombia; State institutions; telenovelas of memory.

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**Resumen:** Las telenovelas han sido consideradas como capaces de proveer un marco de referencia histórico para una audiencia amplia en Colombia. Aunque sean narrativas de ficción, las telenovelas recientes han sido construidas sobre figuras y eventos históricos de relevancia, los cuales se hacen más fáciles de comprender por audiencias que los reportajes periodísticos o las obras documentales. En otras palabras, las telenovelas son fundamentales para el desarrollo de una esfera pública, dado que el atractivo de la narrativa se hace más útil para provocar discusiones contemporáneas.

Mediante una exploración de *En la boca del lobo* (Teleset, 2014) y *Bloque de Búsqueda* (Teleset and Sony Pictures, 2016), dos telenovelas colombianas que abordan el tema de la guerra contra las drogas en la década de 1990, dirigimos la mirada hacia la forma en que las instituciones del Estado son presentadas para generar el debate en la esfera pública. Las dos obras se enfocan en protagonistas opuestos: Un miembro del Cartel de Cali quien decide traicionar a sus jefes criminales, en la primera, o el escuadrón élite de la policía encargado de capturar, desbandar o reducir los carteles de la droga, en la segunda. Este análisis textual y audiovisual se contrasta con grupos focales y entrevistas con audiencias y creadores de estos productos para establecer la relación entre las representaciones y las expectativas sociales sobre las instituciones del Estado, o para reconocer si las telenovelas buscan direccionar las perspectivas que de estas tenga la audiencia.

La importancia de las telenovelas para la construcción de ciudadanía trae consigo ciertos temas para el debates público de una forma más comprensible y, por lo tanto, establece una intersección entre las representaciones de las telenovelas y la interpretación que surge en ellos procesos de mediación y decodificación de las audiencias. El análisis aquí presentado muestra que las telenovelas del siglo XXI crean un sentido contradictorio de identidad ya no basado en la construcción de un imaginario de nación como una comunidad imaginada, sino que tiene como premisa central la configuración colectiva de un Estado institucionalmente débil.

**Palabras clave:** Colombia; historia contemporánea; instituciones del Estado; representaciones audiovisuales; telenovelas de la memoria.

## Introduction

Colombia has positioned itself as a producer and exporter of telenovelas since the 1990s, competing in a market that was previously dominated by the large television production powerhouses of Brazil and Mexico, and the traditional Venezuelan production. The 1980s and early 1990s was characterized by the development of a national discourse through telenovelas, bringing stories from different parts of the country, often taking place in fictionalized settings. Even when their stories were taking place in a specific decade of the XIX or XX century, most telenovelas of the 1980s and 1990s engaged only vaguely with the events that were taking place during that time. Apart from a recurrent reference to the 1948 assassination of presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, telenovelas would take place somewhat removed from any link to the historical figures and places they referred to.

After the turn of the century, Colombian telenovelas have moved to present events of recent history as central to the stories being told, bringing about biopics of famous, – an infamous – characters of the 1990s to the small screen. With the rise of the *narcotelenovela*, – telenovelas whose main characters were drug lords or whose general background was built upon the story of the drug trade plight of the nation – by the mid – 2000s,<sup>1</sup> it did not take long before the lives of drug barons and their governmental counterparts became the stories that filled the television screens. Unlike the telenovelas of the previous century which seldom engaged with figures close to their time of production, these telenovelas were not only dealing with contemporary issues, but with situations that had taken place 20 years earlier.

With *Pablo Escobar, el patrón del mal* (Caracol 2012) and *Alias el Mexicano* (Fox Telecolombia 2013) two of the most feared drug barons of the 1980s and 1990s had their own telenovelas. It did not take long for different telenovelas around other figures of the time receiving their own television series, including the members of the Cali cartel through *En la boca del lobo* (Teleset 2014) and the police elite team tasked with capturing the Medellín cartel members in *Bloque de Búsqueda* (Teleset & Sony Pictures 2016).

Despite ample journalistic accounts, reports, and other non-fiction accounts of what happened during those years, it is telenovelas which bring these stories to a national audience and into the general narrative of the nation. The way these recent telenovelas present how both criminals and Colombian institutions carry out their business provides a discourse which is also incorporated based on the allure of the storytelling, which draws on emotions rather than analytical accounts

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<sup>1</sup> Omar Rincón, “Narco.estética y Narco.cultura en Narco.lombia,” *Nueva sociedad*, no. 222 (2009), 147–63.

to bring their points across. Gabriela Polit Dueñas claims that the television effect, which “makes us believe that what we watch is or was real, as if there were no mediation but a sort of automatic translation of the facts to the screen, [is] what guarantees the success of these TV series”.<sup>2</sup> As such, telenovelas are the lenses through which most Colombians make sense of recent history and determine motivations and responsibilities of those involved in the story. Thus, representations of institution define in no simple terms, the appropriation that audiences have on their agency in relation to those who participated in these events.

## Television in Colombia and the rise of the narcotelenovelas

Television is the national medium of Colombia. As opposed to radio, which was mainly local and commercial, and newspapers which only reached main urban centers and had a high requirement in literacy to be understood, it was television which, by the 1990s had reached most of the national territory with a limited offer of media. Telenovelas of the 1980s highest achievement, according to Jesus Martin Barbero, was that “they knew how to include in the stories the very diverse country and make with these stories a history for the common folk”.<sup>3</sup> Despite the increase in cable subscription in the 2000s and the new streaming services of the 2010s, national television consumption remains the norm, showing that cultural proximity between stories and audience remain fundamental to understand audiovisual consumption.<sup>4</sup> Reports of 2019 indicate that 90 % of the population own a TV set, and 64 % have access to subscription-based cable or satellite TV (which also carries

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2 Gabriela Polit Dueñas, “De cómo leer el narcotráfico y otras advertencias,” *Apuntes de Investigación del CECYP* 16, no. 24 (2014): 184. Our translation from the original in Spanish: “Es el efecto de la televisión de hacernos creer que lo que vemos es o fue la realidad; como si no hubiera una mediación sino una suerte de traslado automático de los acontecimientos hacia la pantalla, es lo que garantiza éxito a estas series”.

3 Omar Rincón. “Jesús Martín-Barbero: Television and Cinema that were able to Include the Country, Build its Memory, and tell its Story,” *Cuadernos de Cine*, no. 25 (2016): 36. Our translation of the original in Spanish: “Lo mejor que hizo la telenovela por este país fue una televisión que supo meter en los relatos al más diverso país y hacer con esos relatos una historia para la gente de común”.

4 Joseph Straubhaar, Melissa Santillana, Vanesa de Macedo Higgins Joyce and Luis Guilherme Duarte, *From Telenovelas to Netflix: Transnational, Transverse Television in Latin America*. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 250.

Colombian free-to-air private and public TV channels).<sup>5</sup> The latest study by CRC (Commission for Communications Regulation) points out that news and telenovelas are the most watched content of national TV channels distributed by cable or terrestrial digital television, reaching 75 % and 50 % respectively, whereas web apps and OTTs are used for consumption of movies and TV series, with 29 % mentioning they do not consume national TV production through these outlets.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Colombian television audience of telenovelas remains high and distributed over the national territory with the consumption skewing towards the older demographic, with younger audiences consuming more online TV.<sup>7</sup> This is relevant because it shows the importance that telenovela still holds for the national imaginary and become central as an area of study for contemporary comprehension of history and its critical appraisal.

The beginning of the XXI century saw a shift away from narratives about elite educated aristocrats and working-class heroes to drug trafficking anti-heroes. After the successes of *Café* (RCN 1994) and *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (RCN 1998), both constructed upon working-class women falling for elite businessmen of power, trying to present the reality of the countryside farmer, in the former, and the underappreciated urban secretary, in the latter, they look now like a final call to the construction of a nation, that had started with the telenovelas of the late 1970s. They still included great amounts of innocence in their main characters, a naïveté that was essential to construct the sense of collective belonging. The move to narratives deeply rooted in drug crime was a shift that started with literature and film in the 1990s, finally permeating national television in the 2000s.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, the new representation of our nation had to come to grasps with the changing aesthetics and realities that telenovelas had been avoiding for a long time. Writing in 2009, Rincón argues that

The new and surprising style, tone and texture of the Colombian Telenovela recognize that we are living in a culture of drug trafficking in regards to aesthetics, values and references. We are a nation that appropriated the narco idea of rising from poverty by any means necessary: boobs, a gun, becoming corrupted, trafficking coke, becoming a guerrilla fighter, becoming a paraco (paramilitary) or becoming a member of the government.<sup>9</sup>

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5 DANE. “Indicadores Básicos de TIC en Hogares,” *Dane.gov.co*. <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/tecnologia-e-innovacion/tecnologias-de-la-informacion-y-las-comunicaciones-tic/indicadores-basicos-de-tic-en-hogares>

6 Comisión de Regulación de Comunicaciones. *El rol de los servicios OTT*. (Bogotá: CRC 2021): 36.

7 Comisión de Regulación de Comunicaciones, *El rol de los servicios OTT*: 43.

8 Rincón, “Narco.estética y Narco.cultura en Narco.lombia”. 57.

9 *Ibid.*

Rincón continues by listing all the contemporary telenovelas of the time to exemplify his point.<sup>10</sup> The 2000s was a coming to grips with a reality of crime, lawlessness, and corruption which showed that, unlike the previous telenovelas that based climbing social ladders on either work or aristocratic bloodlines, it was through a life of crime that many of the poor aspired to become middle or upper-class citizens. Yet the telenovelas of the Narco boom of the 2000s were loosely based on actual drug lords and were piggybacking on the excesses constantly presented in various forms of media, rather than trying to present the most infamous drug barons and their actions in the 1990s.

If the 2000s were filled with images of fictionalized Narcos, the 2010s presented a genre mixture between telenovelas, police dramas and biopics, by turning the production around the most infamous figures of the drug wars. *Pablo Escobar, el patrón del mal* (Caracol Televisión 2012) and *Alias el Mexicano* (Fox Telecolombia 2013) were examples of how the interest in portraying actual drug lords, rather than fictional ones, became the staple of the new decade. It was no longer an issue of presenting narco-culture, but actually engaging with the drug lords themselves, prompting criticism around exploiting the cruel past and justifying criminal activity, without lending a voice to the victims.<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps as a reaction to these Telenovelas that *En la boca del Lobo* and *Bloque de Búsqueda* move the spotlight away from the drug lords themselves and to those who are fighting against them, whether as institutional heroes, in the former, or as a repenting snitch in the latter.

## History, memory and telenovelas

Telenovelas are shared narratives that create part of the comprehension of reality of those who watch them. Much like schools, museums and other forms of cultural consumption, they shape up the historical consciousness of the audience<sup>12</sup> since they provide contextual and narrative explanations for events, showcase values and promote recognition of a variety of actors and points of view. That is the reason why Martin Barbero considered them fundamental for the construction of the sense of nationhood, since they mediate collective reality. Following Benedict

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Omar Rincón. “Amamos a Pablo, odiamos a los políticos. Las repercusiones de Escobar, el patrón del mal,” *Nueva Sociedad* 255 (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Mónica Contreras Saiz, “Conciencia histórica, pensamiento crítico y telenovelas en Latinoamérica,” in *Escenarios para el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico*, edited by Eugenia Varela Sarmiento (Bogotá: CEP-Universidad de la Salle, 2019): 51–86.

Anderson,<sup>13</sup> telenovelas shape the imagined community by providing common tropes and stories. With the allure of storytelling, they connect the dots. They serve as cultural memory, providing shared representations as a “result of a dynamic process through which the past is always reconstructed and represented within the framework of contemporary worries, interests and concerns”.<sup>14</sup> When these telenovelas anchor themselves in recent events, they serve as points of comparison and explanations for a series of disjointed events. It becomes easier to follow the narrative of human interactions than segregated and separated figures, media coverage or news snippets which have presented these events.

This constructive comprehension of a certain historical reality mediated by products such as telenovelas cannot be studied exclusively from the perspective of contents and their direct influence or effects upon an audience that assimilates the portrayed and novelized historical events. Cultural history and cultural studies have shown for decades that audiovisual consumption is framed by the social, economic and cultural configurations of complex historical processes in which the main categories of sense and meaning of concrete representations are interwoven.

Chartier informs us that the interplay between representations, culture and society are everchanging and contradictory relationships.<sup>15</sup> Day by day social groups revise and reinvent structures of thought and ideas and read in diverse forms the cultural product in a society. Consumption and reception of telenovelas or television series, thus, do not only present historical themes and contents, but also take part in the construction of categories and systems of collective representation within more complex configurations, which provide individuals and groups with ways to determine the reality value of the facts portrayed. Telenovelas based on real events or those that reconstruct historical facts within the recent history of a country, engage in dialogue with the spectators and their own judgment and representation schemes which are framed by larger collective representation frameworks.

Therefore, this analysis needs to focus on the study of the development of certain types of historical narratives present in audiovisual products.<sup>16</sup> If we think about these products that engage in dialogue around historical events and a type

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13 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

14 Janny Amaya Trujillo and Adrian José Charlois Allende. “Memoria cultural y ficción audiovisual en la era de la televisión en streaming. Una exploración en torno a la serie Narcos como relato de memoria transnacional,” *Comunicación y Sociedad* 31 (2018): 17.

15 Roger Chartier, *El mundo como representación* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2005).

16 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen. Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

of “experimental thinking about the past”,<sup>17</sup> it is possible to ask from the narrative and formal canon about the ways of representing that have become mainstream in specific audiovisual practices, as the case of contemporary Colombian telenovelas that deal with the recent past or Latin American shows on the drug wars. The decoding of these television products is collectively developed upon a previous foundation that includes the spectators themselves: their knowledge, predispositions, ideas, ideologies, beliefs, and so on.

The importance is then placed, as Ferro highlights, on how audiovisual products enable for a study of a conscience of history evidenced in the representation of historical events and in the way the past is ideologically constructed by them.<sup>18</sup> If telenovelas and TV series are understood as ideological filters,<sup>19</sup> the focus of analysis expands to determine the communicative intention of networks, channels, producers and platforms to exploit specific audiovisual genres, formats and codes repeatedly used. Audiovisual products and media play a role as mediators of the process of representation of history. Although they do not reproduce reality nor history explicitly, they serve to provide a grasp of the way in which contemporary societies build and undertake specific representation modes and codes, linked to cultural and aesthetic models that are inscribed within larger ideological systems. In that sense, the question about the relevance of the portrayal of historical events through telenovelas and TV series is akin to that being made about cinema, where the “main issue is not to determine whether cinema falsifies, trivializes or hinders the historical truth, since film is not history, but rather how, why or what for does it do it”.<sup>20</sup> The question is not one of accuracy or distortion, but one about the conscious selection of particular viewpoints, events, voices and resources, and how that offers a particular mediation for our reflection upon our past.

The history of violence, drug trafficking and armed conflict in Colombia is, in this sense, a shared and collective narrative which seems to engender a feeling of community, beyond the apparent rejection that is occasionally levied against this type of identity narratives. The hypothesis presented here moves away from Martin Barbero’s claim about the importance of telenovelas in the construction of a sense of an imagined nation.<sup>21</sup> The representations and narratives in telenovelas and TV series of the 1980s and 1990s built on a sense of diversity and complexity in the

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17 Ibid.

18 Marc Ferro, *Historia contemporánea y cine* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1995).

19 Pierre Sorlin, *Sociología del cine* (México D. F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985).

20 Goyeneche-Gómez, Edward, “Las relaciones entre cine, cultura e historia: una perspectiva de investigación audiovisual,” *Palabra Clave* 15, no. 3 (2012): 392.

21 Rincón, “Jesús Martín-Barbero”.

construction of characters, stories and contexts, to provide the public with a sense of the collective that reaches across geographic and class divides. The purpose, it seems, was to create collective narratives and myths that would make us understand ourselves as kindred inhabitants on the territorial space of the country. At the dawn of the new millennium, social, political and technological contexts reframe the debate around the meaning of the Nation.

Firstly, in the new millennium, due to the social, economic and cultural crisis unleashed by multiple violences, there is a collective sentiment in society to strengthen a right-wing political ideology, mainly embodied by the democratic security discourse during the government of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002–2006 and 2006–2010). It was built upon the idea of a search for order that imposes a single-minded societal model with an authoritarian tendency, which seeks to evoke feelings and imaginaries, not around de Nation as a collective of people under one territorial and cultural boundary, but around the State, embodied by the institutional figures of the presidency, the police, the army and the general attorney. Secondly, the transformation of media structures, whether in information or entertainment, fostered the private duopoly of Caracol Television and RCN Television, corporations that produced and owned national free-to-air TV channels from 1998 onwards, and which were adjusting and assimilating to the dominant ideology in the country. Finally, during a hostile political climate, creatives seemed to find the history of drug trafficking and guerrillas a recurring theme that also coincided with a larger topic: war and conflict against organized crime.

In this context, the new narrative, from that of creating a sense of nation to one about strengthening the State, was moved towards a sense of imagined community wrapped around the institutions and its actors built upon a struggle and war against organized crime. Evidently, on the one hand, there is a careful selection of the facts and events that are represented, within specific time-bound social categories and historical processes: the State's fight against violence, cartel-led drug trafficking and the armed conflict against the guerrillas, leaving aside other historical issues of relevance. However, on the other hand, the political context produced a sort of moralist dichotomy in the construction of a history of the "good" belonging to the State and the "bad" as part of the criminal organizations.

The force of this opposition, ideologically legitimized by society, ended up concealing, for instance, in many TV series, telenovelas and other entertainment products, other realities in which the agents of the State were, actually, the criminals, corrupted officials, illegal actors, and so on. The narrative against drug trafficking and the guerrillas was sought to, at least partially, hide the impunity of those actors of the State and the government of the new millennium, mainly around the figure of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez. It became impossible, for example, to produce TV series or telenovelas, at the time, based on the phenomenon of extrajudicial killings

by the army, known as the “false positives”.<sup>22</sup> It is in this context that entertainment products of the time need to be read, as they seemed to insist in repeating a representation formula regarding specific historical events which were aimed at strengthening, whether consciously or not, that country narrative.

Communicative mediation, by various types of media including traditional media outlets, social media platforms and audiovisual products, has been fundamental to collectively construct the timelines, with logical continuities, the representation of dominant social actors—clearly identifiable—, social categorizations of social class and institutional affiliation, and moral parameters about the facts or events portrayed. That is to say, audiovisual and other media products have been central to the construction of a social and historical contemporary memory<sup>23</sup> beyond the context of the stories and their validity as historical truth. This communicative and cultural memory<sup>24</sup> is articulated, in the Colombian case, around rather weak but effective narratives in building a thread focused on the value of information and newsworthiness, with a superficial and spur of the moment approach, as the base for the representation.<sup>25</sup> Penagos-Carreño goes further to claim that this is the current approach by traditional media outlets and social media platforms which would be structured in the communicative dimension of memory. This media memory is developed from the remembrances produced or elicited by media outlets as a form of narrated memory.

In the case of telenovelas of memory<sup>26</sup> there is a dual reading of memory. On the one hand, if a given common narrative is made upon certain categories, facts, actors and historical processes, there could be a memory regime that prompts given symbolic linkages that are enmeshed in society through these media products, beyond a demand for other types of tales and narratives. But, on the other

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22 ‘False positives’ was the name given to the illegal killing and extrajudicial killings of innocent people and petty criminals that were presented by army soldiers and officers as guerrilla fighter casualties in combat. This systematic activity of posing unrelated criminals or civilians as guerrilla members was carried out to claim rewards offered by the Army’s high command, which included lengthier leaves of absence and other substantial benefits.

23 Andreas Huyssen, *En busca del futuro perdido. Cultura y memoria en tiempos de globalización* (México D.F.: FCE: 2002).

24 Jan Assmann, “Communicative and cultural memory,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008): 109–18. See also Astrid Erll, *Memoria colectiva y culturas del recuerdo. Estudio introductorio*, (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2012).

25 Penagos-Carreño, Julián. *Mnemosine contra Epimeteo. El recuerdo y el olvido mediático en la sociedad contemporánea*. (Chía: Universidad de La Sabana, 2023).

26 Mónica Contreras Saiz, “Narcotráfico y Telenovelas en Colombia: entre Narconovelas y telenovelas de la memoria,” *Hispanorama*, no. 157 (2017): 26–31.

hand, according to Penagos-Carreño,<sup>27</sup> it could be limited to providing a superficial or immediately fleeting effect that filters to the individual consumers of media as a memory detached from the social environment that does not become part of collective memory.

For both *En la boca del lobo* (Teleset 2014) and *Bloque de Búsqueda* (Teleset and Sony Pictures 2016), two telenovelas that address the war against drugs in Colombia in the early 1990s, it becomes relevant to analyse, precisely, the representation of national and governmental institutions, bearing in mind that these narratives seek to support the notion of a State at war with drug lords, but whose struggle becomes the place, the trope, the collective national consciousness that brings about public debate. These products enter a dialogue with the mediation processes of citizenship and the way they use, perceive and portray these institutions provide a given and contradictory sense of identity. These are products that can be studied from their narrative contrast. While *Bloque de Búsqueda* is completely aligned with the institutional perspective, seeking to honour the heroes of the war against drugs, achieving the ultimate goal of bringing down the world's most infamous drug lord, Pablo Escobar – the starting point of the telenovela which plays as a lengthy flashback –,<sup>28</sup> the main protagonist of *En la boca del lobo* is a criminal traitor, a morally contradictory and ambiguous character, which enables, according to the telenovela, the downfall of the Cali Cartel.

These two telenovelas are also framed by the surge of shows addressing real life drug lords and their actions, which started in the 2010s, following the trend in the 2000s of plots based very loosely on drug barons, but mostly of truly fictitious nature, eliciting what has been described as telenovelas of memory.<sup>29</sup>

## State institutions in Colombian telenovelas

*En la boca del Lobo* and *Bloque de Búsqueda* include a disclaimer before the intro in each episode.<sup>30</sup> The disclaimer seems contradictory. Both shows are clearly

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<sup>27</sup> Penagos-Carreño, *Mnemosine contra Epimeteo*.

<sup>28</sup> It is precisely because of the collective memory of this event, also played in *Pablo Escobar, el patrón del mal*, that the telenovela begins its first episode with the resolution of the plot. Similar to other biopics of renown public figures, by starting from the event that people know about, it builds a story around the characters getting to the point that is kept in the collective memory, as if to fill the consciousness gap about how this situation came to happen.

<sup>29</sup> Contreras Saiz, "Narcotráfico".

<sup>30</sup> *En la boca del lobo* begins with the following disclaimer, translated here into English: En la boca

structured upon the facts that took place during the war on drugs of the 1990s, but at the same time seem to be geared at preventing any backlash from any of those involved in the situations presented and any claim upon image and intellectual property rights associated with the narratives told. Yet it becomes even more surprising to see certain aspects regarding, on the one hand, the use of archival footage, and on the other, the specificity of mentioning institutions in the case of *Bloque de Búsqueda*, with an extra paragraph of the disclaimer ensuring that the representation of both the army and the police are not to be taken to tarnish their image.

Of course, the presence of such disclaimers is the first insight into what these shows are about: fractions of reality that are to be assumed as fiction, while at once anchored in a reality that is embedded in the archival footage included. The poetic license of delving with true facts, historical situations and real events is intermingled with a dramatization of the lives of real characters which are to be assumed as part of a fictionalized world. This in-between real and fiction is a confusing ambiguity that lends for the telenovelas to be at once readings of a historical reality and create a more coherent narrative of the historical memory than disjointed journalistic reports, documentaries and academic studies can provide. The use of archival footage from informative media provides a veil of verisimilitude which makes the past become a vehicle for a narrative that explains the present.<sup>31</sup>

Institutions in both telenovelas are portrayed as fragile, corrupt and too lenient on the criminals, particularly from the perspective of the politicians in government. Despite the heroic path that is provided for either the military, in *Bloque de Búsqueda*, and the one-man decision to break away from a life of crime, in *En la boca del lobo*, what becomes central is that political power is the culprit of crime,

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del lobo is a fiction TV series adapted freely from the book “AT THE DEVIL’S TABLE” by William C. Rempel. The characters and situations represented here, as well as the names used in this program are completely fictitious. Apart from the supplementary use of images from historical archives or real facts of public acknowledgement, any resemblance to names, persons, stories or other events associated with real people or situations is purely coincidental”. Whereas in the case of “Bloque de Búsqueda” the disclaimer goes even further by stating that “The characters, their names, institutions and the situations portrayed here are totally fictitious. Apart from the use of images taken from historical archives or real facts of public acknowledgement, any resemblance to names, entities, institutions, people, stories or other events associated with real people or situations are non-intentional and only coincidental. The police and the army represented in these TV series are fictitious and the facts dramatized in relation to them should not be associated with the real National Police and National Army of Colombia nor is there any intention to tarnish their image”.

31 Sergio Rodríguez-Blanco y Federico Mastrogiovanni, “Narrativas hegemónicas de la violencia. El crimen organizado y el narcotráfico entre el periodismo y las ficciones televisivas,” *Análisis. Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura* 58 (2018): 89–104. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/analisi.3098>.

by either oppressing, enabling or turning a blind eye to the crimes of drug lords and their ilk. The problem, thus, slides from the responsibility of the individual criminals and wraps around the ineptitude, corruption or cruelty of the institutions that represent the State.

Despite *Bloque de Búsqueda* being a gung-ho salute to the sacrifices of the police officers in the pursuit of bringing criminals to justice, and the level of bloodshed and cruelty displayed by Narco outlaws, it also exemplifies the government and its political institutions as unable to toe the line, willing to negotiate and concede to the indomitable power of the drug lords, while the heroic army and police officers put their loved ones in danger. It is striking, then, that the disclaimer clarifies that the image of the army and police is not meant to be tarnished by the TV series, when they are the ones presented mostly as heroic in their endeavours. The summary of this feeling is exemplified by a scene on episode number 52 when a dialogue between two police officers ends with one of them claiming “That’s the reason we are [as screwed] as we are in this country, Gardeazabal, because bandits do as they please, and we, the law, work but with our hands tied”, referring to the government’s concession to the drug lords to suspend the extradition treaty with the US. The conversation between the Attorney General and General Vega in episode number 59 highlights, almost to a level of mockery, how the government seems to be unable to grasp the power of Pablo Escobar, and the disbanded police squad are called upon as heroes to save the day.

In the case of *En la boca del lobo* the aspect around the money provided by the Cali Cartel to the campaign of a presidential candidate, resembling the scandal known as *Proceso 8000*, which implicated President Ernesto Samper, was played with innuendo rather than directly claiming the knowledge and involvement of the President. As told by Rafael Noguera, main scriptwriter of the TV series, they were aware that they had to be very careful not to claim the fictitious President Sampedro was aware of any money coming into his campaign from the Cali cartel, because President Samper has been adamant about how Congress cleared him of any wrongdoing. Noguera states that “we had to beat around the bush ... Sony was very concerned, and they engaged a lawyer to ensure that in the four or five episodes where the campaign financing was mentioned, it was clearly stated that the money went into the campaign, but a doubt, rather than a claim, had to be made as to whether the candidate knew about it. We left a shadow of a doubt that, I believe, worked well”. Clearly, the whole incident and the way it is portrayed in the TV series adds to the common debate about the legitimacy of that government, and the suspicion that should be levied upon all institutions. Episode 35 begins with a public address by President Sampedro, followed by a conversation between Wilson and Manuel Ramírez. Wilson tells his father, Ricardo that “politicians [are] tie-wearing thieves” that have been constantly financed by the Cali Cartel. In a nutshell, they

describe all the governmental institutions as corrupt and untrustworthy, to the point that their own code of crime seems to be more respectable than any political system.

Asking to the other telenovelas of the decade, the audience is left with “loving Pablo, and hating politicians”.<sup>32</sup> Despite *En la boca del lobo* and *Bloque de Búsqueda* being told from the perspective of those set against the drug lords, the end conclusion is that our institutions are broken, and that there is more than crime to the drug lords, often clout with reasonable merits and values around respect, family and religion. Thus, it is the national institutions which are untrustworthy, whereas crime lords seem to behave along “expected” lines, despite them being reprehensible. In the end, it is a total distrust in the institutions that should prevail, because even heroes do not come unscathed dealing with them.

In a series of six focus groups with 55 people about *En la boca del lobo* carried out in 2014 before the product was ever broadcast, the people participating in the study claimed that it was interesting to see another telenovela about recent history, stating that “It has been overused, but it is good ... we already know about Pablo Escobar and [González Rodríguez] Gacha [from previous Telenovelas] it is good to learn as well about the Rodríguez Orejuela”,<sup>33</sup> exemplifying that this type of fiction is taken as an appropriate way to learn more about Colombian contemporary history, a source of historical information. Furthermore, those participating admitted that they felt this type of shows could have a negative impact on the image of the country abroad, while also praising it as an educational element about contemporary Colombian history and deeming it unsuitable to be watched with children, because of its content.

Carolina Barrera, one of the scriptwriters of *Bloque de Búsqueda*, acknowledges the importance of audiovisual representation of the past to better comprehend the present. She also recognizes the complex questions of the creative process from the perspective of the narrative construction, in which “evil characters” are always better characters than the “good” ones. For her, with the new millennium, TV series and telenovelas started to focus mainly on the “evil characters” who, in recognizable local contexts, provide identification by the audience based on cultural proximity.

Because of this, *Bloque de Búsqueda* tried to present the tale of this elite team away from a spotlight on Pablo Escobar. In the words of Barrera, they wanted to “tell the story of the downfall of Escobar without him”. This required for the script to focus mainly on the elite police squad, using other archetypes that would expand

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<sup>32</sup> Rincón, “Amamos.”

<sup>33</sup> Observatorio de Medios. *En la boca del lobo. Focus Group Report*. (Unpublished report, 2014): 19–20.

the frame of reference about state institutions in the 1990s facts that were amply known. In direct contrast to the telenovelas of the turn of the millennium, in both *En la boca del lobo* and *Bloque de Búsqueda* the viewpoint and central narrative thread was placed on specific characters who had a real counterpart, which enabled a positioning both for the fiction and for the events of the past being portrayed.

State institutions, like the police and governmental officers, are represented in a way that produces a contradictory effect related to the identity between citizens and the State. Those characters representing the State, as parts of the government or heads of institutions, are presented as weak and powerless in contrast to the strong and powerful criminals. Thus, the 1990s were shown as the decade of State institutions collapsing under the might of drug lords. This portrayal would seem to justify the political discourse of the beginning of the new millennium, centred on a sense of order, surveillance and the control of violence to be imposed by strong state institutions, promoting the ideology underscored by the policy of “democratic security”.

## Conclusion

The importance of telenovelas for the social construction of citizenship rests on their ability to bring some topics to the larger public in a way that is more comprehensible, by being construed upon a well-established genre, which simplifies interpretation. Although Telenovelas are never consumed in a cultural vacuum, and therefore receive mediations that are connected to the overarching themes and debates around them, they become part of the possibilities of interpretation available to contemporary audiences.

History is built by interpretation of sources regarding specific events, and the way those events are framed tells us about those that create and distribute the products, more so than about the events displayed in the programs themselves. However, under the guise of being as close as possible to the original sources, by the use of archival material, the actual or similar names to those portrayed, and connecting reasonably well with the public’s recollection of the events described, these telenovelas of memory present a form of engaging with a recent past. They describe how this past is understood in our present, and what the expectations, underlying assumptions and personal associations made by their creators are permeated through the stories told. Despite moving away from biopics focused on the criminals and their potential justifications to the snitch betraying the criminals or the police squad established to hunt them down, the common ground, despite the different viewpoints, remains a distrust in the government quite the opposite of the

discourse promoted for the 2000s by President Álvaro Uribe Vélez. If the nation was built upon the telenovelas of the 1980s and 1990s, as presented by Martín Barbero, and the following decades were supposed to present a construction of a sense of common governability by strengthening the State, what ends up coming out is quite the opposite, a disjointed, ill-conceived and corrupt form of government that renders institutions as weak, useless and incompetent when not blatantly criminal themselves.

This negative view on state institutions is a reflection, not of the past, but of our present state of affairs, and highlights that the drug war brought with it a destabilization of the social contract that is felt today. In a way, as informed by Rincón,<sup>34</sup> the Narco seems to be justified as a way to overcome systemic oppression, despite being destructive and promoting extreme violence. In opposition to these violent criminals, there are committed individuals within unstable and weak institutions, which render the general populace as unable to find anyone to trust to bring back a sense of justice and stability.

In Colombia, the context remains of a larger population that continues to consume national TV productions, and that, as exemplified by the focus groups, still enters a mediation with telenovelas to make sense of their current reality. If these telenovelas dress themselves as closer to reality than ever before, by including archival footage and claiming to be based on journalistic accounts, they represent the easiest access into comprehending the current memory of a recent historical past. They might elicit discussions that transcend roadcast consumption and expand a dialogue over other media spaces, such as Twitter threads or Facebook feeds, which might generate a more elaborate contemporary debates on their memory value.<sup>35</sup> However, by setting most of the underlying problems under the guise of a defective and weak State, they provide fodder for a distrust in political and democratic processes, undermining any effort to attain a more orderly and organized present or, at least, fostering a sense of powerlessness against the historical evidence of State corruption.

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34 Rincón, “Narco.estética.”; Rincón, “Amamos.”

35 Contreras Saíz, “Conciencia histórica, pensamiento crítico y telenovelas en Latinoamérica”. 80.

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