

A Semiotic Approach to Social Discourses on Colombian Political Events of the Late Twentieth Century

Erika Zulay Moreno Bueno

Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga, Bucaramanga, Colombia

The paper that we present below addresses a methodological approach to Marc Angenot's statements, in his *Social Discourse* (2012) of integrating certain views and opinions, taken from the written press, literature, and television, on events happened in Colombia, prior to 1990 presidential elections. When we study the discursivities¹ that are the product and/or the representatives of some political crimes that took place in Colombia between August 1989 and April 1990, we speak mainly on discourses that took place some decades ago. Some of these stories have allowed us to give meaning to the world and, at the same time, integrate us in it.

Keywords: social discourses, semiotics², Colombian presidential election

Introduction

We think that our coming into the world as human beings is contaminated by a series of discourses that shape our conceptions on our surroundings. Some stories assist us to give meaning to the world while integrating us in it. It is described by Dalmasso who tells us: "In them, [in the stories] we can count ourselves as a character in the narrated action or they can force us to trace their tracks in the choice of history and in the emotions that permeate them" (2011, p. 7). The stories emerge chronologically, as part of a larger story that explains why they pose a vision of the world, a vision in which we find all kinds of passions that ultimately drive and determine the writing process of those stories.

Angenot says that social discourse is the preferred medium for historical rationality. It is also the preferred place for everything that is said or written within a certain society, in a given time. Hence, social discourses are not only contemporary events but they also become historical discourses. We will outline the notion of interdiscursivity "as interaction and mutual influence of the axiomatic of discourse" (2012, p. 25).

Interdiscursivities

The Colombian electoral process of 1990 was characterized by extreme violence exerted by drug trafficking and para-militarists individuals. Four presidential candidates were murdered:

- (1) Jaime Pardo Leal;
- (2) Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, of the leftist Patriotic Union Party;
- (3) Luis Carlos Galán of the Liberal Party;

Erika Zulay Moreno Bueno, Ph.D., Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts Department, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga, Bucaramanga, Colombia.

¹ Discursive—referring to writing—Dealing with several topics, or with one topic from several points of view, but not in a clear or logical manner (The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary, 1987, p. 146, New York).

² Semiotic—The theory of symbols (The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary, 1987, p. 907, New York).

(4) Carlos Pizarro, leader of the newly demobilized M-19 guerrilla.

On Sunday, May 27, 1990, the votes were held in which the candidate of the Colombian Liberal Party, César Gaviria, was finally elected. This has been one of many violent episodes that have previously occurred in Colombia, known as years of internal conflict.

Interested in the construction of national identity, and observing from the current context of Colombian politics, we have, therefore, referred the following reflections to a set of different stories around events, such as the 1990 Colombia's presidential elections. Three decades after the events occurred, the following documents were collected for this analysis:

The two main journalistic Colombian national newspapers (*El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*) note on the following dates:

Year of events/*El Tiempo* newspaper:

December 30, 1990: The events of 90.

October 19, 1991: Key 1990 falls Pizarro: the nightmare is repeated. Cover pages of the newspaper *El Tiempo* about Luís Carlos Galán and Carlos Pizarro.

Later years/*El Espectador* newspaper

Multimedia special: Galán 20 years.

El Eskimal y la Mariposa by Nahúm Montt. Crimes novel that narrates this event.

Some chapters of the television series *Escobar*, the pattern of evil, in which the construction of some of these events can be seen as:

Chapter 42: the murder of Luís Carlos Galán Chapter 53/97: The murder of Bernardo Jaramillo.

Chapter 55/101: The murder of Carlos Pizarro.

We have found it useful to make this linkage between narrative, visual (fiction), and discourses cited from the written press. These products that correspond to three readings or views on the same event express the social discourse that characterized the Colombian society of the last years. In this way, we want to review the different views on a particular moment in Colombia, as it is projected by the social tendency to debate. Similarly, we want to examine the incorporation of the field of audiovisual production within the discourses, and the TV series, such as *Escobar*. "The pattern of evil" allows us to understand the role played by this type of narrative in the fabric of social discourse. Taking into account the national and international exposure, this production achieved contrary to the limited scope of the national press and the novel *El Eskimal y la Mariposa*.

The Events

In the course of the 20th century, six presidential candidates were assassinated in Colombia, a figure perhaps unprecedented in countries of that region. They were six candidates from different ideologies: two candidates of the Liberal Party, one candidate of the Conservative Party, and three candidates of the left ideology parties.

The most well known case, from which the national history marked the beginning of the period known in Colombia as La Violencia (capitalized) happened on April 9, 1948. At this day, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was murdered, while carrying out a successful presidential campaign by the Liberal Party. Nobody ever knew who hired the man that shot Gaitán. However, it was part of the common knowledge that he was a member of Colombia's army forces. Roa, the murderer, was lynched by the enraged masses and because of that, part of the story was buried. On this fact, there are many works ranging from history and academic research to fiction and

a film that recently narrated the life of the murderer, Roa, who was released on April 9, 2013. However, this is not the period in which we are going to concentrate on this paper.

The case that closes this list of homicides in the 20th century happened on November 2, 1995, when the conservative leader Álvaro Gómez Hurtado was assassinated. Previously he was exerting a stark opposition to the Government of Ernesto Samper, for inputting millions of dollars from the Cali Cartel, to his presidential campaign. This case remains open up to now because no effective arrests were executed and no help was offered for finding the culprits and their motives. Although this is a more recent case, it is not part of this analysis either.

The events that we want to analyze are the murder cases that remained unresolved of candidates for the 1990 presidency. There is a hypothesis, which assumes that members of the Colombian State forces, drug trafficking, and paramilitary organizations are involved in the assassinations and have some responsibility for them.

On October 11, 1987, the Patriotic Union (UP in Spanish) presidential candidate Jaime Pardo Leal was assassinated. This crime marked the beginning of the mass-murdering of militants affiliated with the left ideology party. The crime of Jaime Pardo was followed by killing thousands of other supporters among councilors, mayors, and congressmen, who were murdered by paramilitaries coerced by politicians. At its peak, this political party managed to elect 16 mayors, 256 councilors, and 16 representatives to the Colombian Congress. However, within two decades, more than 3,000 of militants were killed because of political reasons.

On August 18, 1989, Luis Carlos Galán was murdered. Many examination processes are still opened and research is progressing slowly. Additionally, it is already known that some intellectual authors, such as Alberto Santofimio were mates of the relevant political party. Similarly, Pablo Escobar and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, who were drug traffickers, were also members of the party. This case is perhaps the one that received more coverage and more data were collected about it.

On March 22, 1990, in front of their custodians, in the waiting room of the Eldorado International Airport, the narco-paramilitary forces murdered Bernardo Jaramillo. He was another presidential candidate of the UP. Jaramillo was shot by a 15-year-old assassin, Andrés Arturo Gutiérrez Maya. Arturo was murdered weeks later, together with his father, while on-leave, outside the prison. The leader of the left UP was enthusiastic about his campaign and claims *Venga esa mano País* (Country come to give me a hand). He then published his sympathy that the Spanish newspaper *El País*, chronicled as follows: "The death of Jaramillo closes the hope of a better future for Colombia" (March 23, 1990).

On April 26, 1990, Gerardo Uribe Gutiérrez, another minor (15-year-old), paid, and trained by the paramilitary Carlos Castaño murdered the leader of the newly demobilized M-19, Carlos Pizarro, in a plane in mid-flight. After committing the crime, the minor-assassin raised his hands for surrendering. But the Administrative Department of Security's (DAS in Spanish) agents, Alberto Romero and Jaime Ernesto Gómez Muñoz immediately shot him. However, nobody knows where they got the weapons that were banned in mid-flight.

Represent Reality: Written Press Register

"Social discourse has the 'monopoly of the representation of reality'" (Fossaert, 1983a, p. 336, cited by Angenot, 2012, p. 64). "Representation of reality that contributes to a great extent to make a reality and history" (Angenot, 2012, p. 64). These are the headlines of Colombian, national and international, newspapers, of the

1980s and early 1990s. They were responsible for the high degree of the country decomposition, because of the perverse actions of the drug trafficking mafias, against democratic institutions, political leaders, and the civilian population.

The press under a presumption of objectivity and information has contributed to the fact that information about this, particular act of assassinations, prior to the 1990 presidential elections in Colombia, has focused on one martyr, that of the candidate Luís Carlos Galán. Only very little information was found about the other victims. The murders of Jaramillo and Pizarro happen even more unnoticed.

The Luís Carlos Galán homicide, on August 18, 1989, was the one that caused the greatest repudiation among the civil society. For this reason, the newspaper *El Espectador*, on its first page of August 19, 1989, a day after the so-called assassination, made a clear synthesis of the moment Colombia was going through:

In a day of horror for Colombia, Dr. Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento, one of the great figures of this century, and a precandidate for the Presidency was killed last night by a hitman who shot him point-blank during a demonstration in the town of Soacha. Hours earlier, the Antioquia Police commander, Colonel Valdemar Franklin Quintero, had been killed in Medellín. The country dawns shaken today by this killing. An atrocious wave of blood that shames us before the world.

The death of Galán occurs when the country is mired in the worst degree of anarchy, lack of unity and action of its leaders and institutions. A single cry rises once again in the midst of this bleak panorama: Solidarity in the war to defeat crime and restore dignity and peace to Colombia. (*El Espectador*, August 19, 1989. The underlined phrase is ours)

We want to highlight the phrase: “The country dawns today shaken by this atrocious wave of blood that shames us before the world”. The shame feeling that the journalist appeals to has been a constant point in the Colombian collective imagination. It is so due to the fact that we are internationally described as drug traffickers, which most countries require from us having an entering visa for visiting their countries. Colombia is a society that has lived under the stigma of this scourge and has undoubtedly caused a great impact at the moment of defining us as a society. A society clearly feels of being in a constant inferiority situation, comparing with other nations.

El Tiempo, for its part, had highlighted on its front page, after the death of Galán, the *March of Silence*, as a historical precedent in which 15,000 students from Bogotá’s main universities, has demonstrated. Consequently, an imaginary thought was created in which the young voters take a certain role in changing the course of the country. Unfortunately, the killing of Galán erases this opportunity and even stops it. Although Galán’s figure continues to be profiled as the missing opportunity, it is a fact that never can be verified. This is because his political heir, the one who finally won the 1990 presidential election—Cesar Gaviria—who opened the way to neoliberalism, and by that action promoted the disastrous social and economic consequences of this ideology.

As has been said in this work, it was a tragic campaign, referred to the life of several political figures of the moment, as well as journalists and other civilians, who have remained mostly anonymous. The cover we use on Bernardo Jaramillo’s murder, for example, could be traced more easily in the Spanish newspaper *El País* than in any Colombian newspaper. In a country, like Colombia, it has been difficult talking politics with the left parties.

Crime tears Colombia once more. Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, one of the most beloved and charismatic leaders of the left in recent years, was murdered yesterday in Bogotá. (...) Jaramillo received four impacts: two in the chest and two in the abdomen. As usually happens in Colombia, nobody knows why, yesterday, precisely at the time of the crime, the machine in charge of detecting metals, installed at the entrance to the air terminal, was not working. Because of this, the

mini-machine gun that cut Jaramillo's life went in without problems. (...) The death of Jaramillo closes the hope of a better future for Colombia. (*El País*, March 23, 1990. The underlined phrase is ours)

Impunity is another aspect that remains after the tracking of this news. It also has strong consequences in the collective imagination. So much that Colombian citizens do not believe in justice or in institutions: "In the recent Great Survey of Colombian's Opinion 2012-2, justice is very badly referred. 66% of respondents do not believe in justice" (Restrepo, 2012). The figure in 2017 has risen to 87% of unfavorable compared to the image of Colombian political institutions.

Finally, we highlight one more aspect after the news about the death of Carlos Pizarro:

It was 9:51 in the morning. They flew at 16,000 feet and Pizarro rested calmly in chair 23-A of the HK-1400 of Avianca. The murderer played fifteen to one. He unloaded the fifteen projectiles from his Mini-Ingram, safely and securely, at a distance of one meter and eighty, down Pizarro's back, and received in return a single Beretta projectile in the middle of his forehead. Nine impacts on the head, three in the neck and three in the left hand gave life to the legend of Pizarro. (...) Later, a firm voice of Margoth, Pizarro's widow was heard. The bereaved mother said: Please. May all the slogans be peace and love, because everyone, guerrillas and soldiers, we are all brothers. (*El Tiempo*, October 19, 1991. The underlined sentence is ours)

The dialogue between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC in Spanish) resulted in the de-escalation of the conflict and conversion into a political party. The former Colombian guerrilla thus, became today a political party called Revolutionary Alternative Force of the Common man. Undoubtedly before such a fact take place to appear opposing groups and diverse opinions. According to recent figures, the support for the peace process went up from 46.7% to 52.8% (Datexco Company SA-Opinometer, collection dates: July 26 to July 31, 2017). Within this period, arms and weapons were handed over by the FARC to the government. This action also increased the credibility of the peace negotiations as the ELN went up from 16.5% to 23.6%.

Represent the Reality: Crimes Novel

The bullet was hiding in the penumbra, for five years and reappeared on Friday, August 18, 1989, at 8:45 at night, in the Plaza de Soacha. Disguised as nine millimeters, it bit the edge of a bulletproof vest and smashed six centimeters of Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento's abdominal aorta. Seven months later, on Thursday, March 22, 1990, it reached Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa at the Eldorado airport. The bullet seemed to turn in an arbitrary and unpredictable spiral move and then lose itself in distractions and absurd details. It became insignificant for the final examination and remained a mystery. However, the bullets had only postponed their last meeting, and nobody could know it yet ... Still missing, they are the most ferocious and terrible parts of their attacks. (Montt, 2005, p. 268)

The Colombian crime story has among its characteristics the fictionalization of the city. *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* of Nahúm Montt is not an exception, as its history began in Bogotá, at the morning of March 25, 1990. In a middle-class department, the corpse of an old woman was imbedded in a glass table. In the victim's mouth, there was a crumpled paper with a four-digit number: 7.173. Next to her, a lifeless body of a dog was found. Inside a cage, a parrot that throws some few clues was also found. It seemed to be the only witness for the crime. In a closed room of the house, there was a second finding: A man badly injured, but still alive. As is normal within the culture of impunity, nobody has heard or seen anything. The crime comes in addition to the murder of a presidential candidate at the airport. This was Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, murdered in fiction and reality on March 22, 1990. Through the plot, a dialogue between fiction and reality was established and with it, the reader becomes a participant in a dark moment of Colombia recent history, as it was expressed by the

murder of three presidential candidates between August 1989 and April 1990.

Montt's story shares with many other contemporary Colombian novelists, a theme undoubtedly central to the narrative of the country. It is about violence linked to other phenomena, such as drug trafficking, contract killers, guerrillas, paramilitaries, corruption or, in general, internal social-political conflict supporting groups. Such a story or a novel has as its starting point and an enigma that raises many questions. There are two victims, the old woman, and the man badly wounded, and there is a policeman who has been implicated in some way in the murder of the presidential candidates, and a criminal or several ones walking free on the streets of the city. The figure of corrupt police contributes to the figure of impunity and the insecurity creates a loss of credibility in the state institutions.

The construction of reality that Montt reveals in his novel is convincing since it arises as a result of some facts of the public domain. It makes the attempt to venture a hypothesis and denouncing that the same intellectual author was behind the three cases of murder, either because the *modus operandi* was very similar, or because of certain obvious links. They may be the hitmen who killed Pizarro and Jaramillo were cousins, some significant detail that was not investigated at the time. Perhaps the most important thing was the fact that in all three murders, the same failure appeared within the escort service of the now-defunct DAS.

Thus, in this novel, Coyote is the key element of this connection. It is because he is a creature that, throughout the text, plays a triple function: a criminal, an investigator, and a victim. The Coyote represents one of the DAS agents who arrive at the department of the old woman to do the removal of her corpse. He then discovers that the dead woman is the aunt of the Jaramillo Ossa's murderer, a crime in which he has also been involved, as a group member of the candidate custodians. The Coyote has also participated in the attack against Galán, as well as on Pizarro's. His role as being a simple custodian is not really, because he was in charge of murdering the assassins before they can speak or give their version of the facts.

Death on duty is posited as an end by itself, not as a mean for achieving anything. That increases the violence pointless... However, despite this apparent inexorable condition of the system, at the end there is a man who manages to escape. The Coyote does it, even at the cost of erasing his own individuality, by involving himself in the misery of the streets as a homeless person. He manages to avoid death, but no remorse. In the end, we get the impression that nothing changes, the machinery of death remains intact.(...) And what remains clear to the protagonist, and clear to us as readers is, that the bullet fired many years ago, has not yet reached its last victim. The struggle must continue. (Albornoz, 2011, p. 168)

Represent Reality: Escobar, the Pattern of Evil, TV Series

As we have been commenting on the novel *El Eskimal y la Mariposa*, a hypothesis about the possible or impossible culprits of the crimes that occurred before the 1990 elections was raised, and the question arises "Why Pablo Escobar was held responsible so lightly as it was proven over time?" This drug trafficker was one of several persons who were responsible for the murder of Galán. But he was not involved in either Jaramillo's or Pizarro's murder. Initially, he was blamed in an attempt of hiding the true culprits, among whom were even high military commanders.

An example supporting this claim comes to the fact that on the day that Jaramillo was murdered, the director of the DAS at that time, General Miguel Maza Márquez, accused the Medellín cartel of being the intellectual author of the assassination. Pablo Escobar Gaviria argued in his defense that he had always felt great sympathy and admiration for Jaramillo, and he had even met him several times. A month later, after the murder of Carlos Pizarro Leongómez, Escobar Gaviria was again been accused. Again, he had come out in his

defense arguing for the convenient empathy towards the leftist political groups.

This particular event was televised by the Colombian TV series—*Escobar*, the pattern of the evil that occurred between 2009 and 2012 by Caracol Televisión. This TV story was based on a book, *The Parable of Pablo*, written by the journalist and former mayor of Medellín Alonso Salazar. The book is based on various journalistic documents and real testimonies, but also in fictional stories adapted for television.

In the chapters that we had in mind for this analysis, the viewers appreciated the scenes in which the commanders of paramilitary groups, like the Castaño brothers, met several times with Escobar to look for an economic and logistic alliance for assassinating Jaramillo and Pizarro. However, in the series, Escobar's refusal to participate in these crimes and, at the same time, he is calling himself a sympathizer of the left.

In the conversation that follows, Pedro Motoa (which represents in the fiction the character of Jorge Luís Ochoa—a member of the Ochoa clan, which is a Medellín drug dealer), Pablo Escobar, and Miguel Moreno (named in the fiction as the commander's paramilitary Fidel Castaño (one of the brothers of the Castaño clan), the meeting is made with the purpose of incorporating Miguel as a collaborator of Escobar. In this meeting, the talks went as follow:

Pedro: We basically want you to delegate the self-defense right to your brother and work with us and be closer to us

Miguel: Well gentlemen, it is an honor that makes my day, why or what?

Pablo: Miguel, even though we have our differences in the ideals, we can work together even if we know that I am a person of the left and you are a person inclines towards the extreme right.

Additionally, none of us can deny that all and each of the councils and their advising groups are important but also effective and significant, and are very important for us (...). (Chapter 92, Part 2, 06:20-07:05, <http://vertelenovelas.net/ver/pablo-escobar-el-patron-del-mal-92.html>)

This series also supports a hypothesis that lacks a piece of conclusive evidence for its argument about the alliance between the drug trafficking and the guerrilla of the M-19, about taking over the palace of justice, which happened in 1985. This is one of many versions that exist about the fact, previously mentioned, about the total impunity. The size of the audience this series had in other countries indicates on the country's history recreation. It is done by combining elements and figures on criminals those who became over time a myth. The series take audio-visual archives in which momentous events are happening and mix them with fiction. This success of the audiovisual sources does not refer so much to the historical point of view, because of the notion that history and truth, the first to be preserved, are already being presented in the TV series.

During the week of Black Barcelona 2015, the Colombian writers Laura Restrepo, Sergio Álvarez, and Gustavo Forero (director of Medellín Negro) met and spoke about the current Colombian literature and about crucial topics, such as violence, urban space, and intimacy. After their lectures and as an anecdote, a participant from the dismayed public asked about the audiovisual production boom that exists in Colombia. Is it wrong for Colombia to make novels, series, and movies of assassins? The writer Alvarez replied to him with some irony: "What else we do, our Nobel prizes in physics?" (Arenas, 2015).

Although the series wanted to treat history from the victims' point of view, it is the so-called pattern of evil that undoubtedly takes the entire leading role.

Brief Conclusion

While talking about national imaginary, we know that it can oscillate between hope for a better future and

hopelessness that emerges from the situation. The hopelessness fulfills us with continual terror and is beyond our understanding. The hope for a better life is based on the examples of those characters who have given their lives when opposing illegality. Both the written press, the novel, and the audiovisual media are crossed by possible heroes that spin the story and leave a sense of hope. On the other hand, it appears despair, which is based on a dark relationship between state actors and groups outside the law. The fact that trust in the institutions does not exist aggravates the hope of solving problems in a short time.

We can say then that the event to which we have referred has been decisive and has left a mark on the way we configure ourselves, both inside and outside Colombia. It is difficult to advance when a stigma is uploaded so that in some cases, it limits the opportunities and creates a negative image of the country. However, contrary to any wrong image, the feelings of joy that characterize the Colombian people are strong. Sergio Álvarez referred to them by saying: “In Colombia, these things happen, but it is a country of both good and bad opportunities, so you have to play with them” (Arenas, 2015).

References

- Albornoz, M. (2011). Aproximaciones a *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* de Nahúm Montt. In J. S. Zapatero and A. M. Escribá (Eds.), *Género negro para el siglo XXI*. Madrid: Leartes.
- Angenot, M. (2012). *El discurso social. Los límites de lo pensable y lo decible*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Arenas, I. (2015). Tres escritores plantean el debate. ¿Novela negra en Colombia? *El Espectador*. Consultado el 20 de febrero 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.elspectador.com/noticias/cultura/novela-negra-colombia-articulo545381>
- Baiz, A. (Director). (2013). *Roa*. Colombia: Cinecolor Films.
- Dalmaso, M. (2011). Semblanzas de la discursividad argentina en épocas del Bicentenario. In Institut des Hautes Etudes de l'Amérique Latine (IHEAL) (Ed.), *Bicentenaire des indépendances Amérique Latine caraïbes*. Paris: IHEAL.
- Lozano, P. (1990). Muerto a tiros en Bogotá el líder de la izquierda Bernardo Jaramillo. *La esposa de Jaramillo le protegió con su cuerpo*. Archivo: El País.
- Montt, N. (2005). *El Eskimal y la mariposa*. Bogotá: Editorial Alfaguara.
- Observatorio de la Democracia. (2013). Los colombianos quieren una paz negociada, pero sin concesiones. *Vanguardia*. Consultado el 20 de febrero 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.vanguardia.com/actualidad/colombia/232769-los-colombianosquierenuna-paz-negociada-pero-sin-concesiones>
- Restrepo, J. (2012). *Gran Encuesta Colombia Opina 2012-2*. Archivo: Ipsos Napoleón Franco.
- Uribe, J. (Producer), & Moreno, C. (Director). (2012). *Escobar. El patrón del mal*. Colombia: Caracol Televisión.