

# Profiting From Pablo: Victimhood and Commercialism in A Global Society

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Collective memory of atrocities is a fractured and disputed terrain. In this article, we empirically explore the complex process of translating violent events that took place in Medellín during the 1980s and 1990s into collective memory. It examines the conflict between Medellín inhabitants' (in)ability to overcome trauma and shape their collective identity and the power of global media representations, exemplified by popular TV shows such as *Narcos*, to impose their narratives and consequently shape the present nature of the city. Drawing on original empirical material, consisting of ethnographic observations and interviews with residents of Medellín, including victims of narco-violence, this paper examines processes of memory commodification and its consequences on the global recognition of victimhood.

**Key Words:** collective memory, consumerism, cultural trauma, global entertainment industry, memories of atrocities, victimhood

## INTRODUCTION

During his time in office as mayor of Medellín (2016–19), Federico Gutiérrez repeatedly tried to establish contact with Netflix, the US-based global entertainment corporation. In a letter entitled 'Encounter with Memory', he pointed out that in 1991 Medellín was the most violent city in the world and made clear why he was writing:

[N]obody escaped the tragedy: journalists, judges and attorneys, public servants, police officers and soldiers, athletes, artists, entrepreneurs, citizens, thousands of men and women died due to narco-terrorism. [...] That tragedy has become an almost-fictional commodity.<sup>1</sup>

Medellín's tragic history, Gutiérrez argued, had become an action movie offering an inaccurate view of history and making drug dealing and the mafia culture associated with it 'a cultural revolution'. He finished by calling for a changed narrative: 'let us tell this story again to defeat the

1 Letter 'Encuentro con la Memoria' [Encounter with Memory] (n.d.) from Federico Gutiérrez to Netflix. Gutiérrez's personal secretary gave us access to this and other private communications from the office of the mayor.

power that narco-culture and illegality have today'. The letter refers to a period when Medellín became one of the most violent cities in the world, largely due to the activities of the notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar. Between 1981 and 1996, over 65,000 homicides were recorded in the urban area of the city alone (Ceballos Melguizo 2001). Gutiérrez criticised the representation of these tragic events in the popular Netflix series *Narcos* on the grounds that it caused the symbolic presence of the drug lord to haunt the city and shape the narrative about its past.

This article empirically explores the complex processes of translation of violent events that took place in Medellín during the 1980s and 1990s into collective memory. It examines the inability of the city's inhabitants to overcome trauma, and shape their collective identity, due to the power of the narratives imposed by global media representations to shape the present nature of the city. As Gutiérrez's letter indicates, the commercial demands for entertainment of global audiences help to obliterate the extreme suffering of people in the Global South.

Based on the premise that collective memories of atrocities are a fractured and disputed terrain (Hearty 2014), this article offers an empirically informed exploration of power relations and social processes that shape the collective narratives of suffering in local and international contexts, particularly when these are affected by the dynamics of global capitalism. In the first section, we review scholarly literature on crime, memory and media and point out the need to study the role of global media and commercialism in building memories of atrocities. To address this scholarly gap, the article draws on the concept of *trauma economy*: the media, information networks and communicative capitalism that form the material framework of the movement of traumatic memory in a global age (Tomskey 2011). We bring together psychological and sensory memories of direct witnesses of cartel violence and historical accounts of Medellín in the 1980s and 1990s, to provide a sensory overview (McClanahan and South 2019) of the atrocities committed in the city. We highlight the contrast between the traumatic sensory and emotional impact of those events on the victims and the light and entertaining tone of narco-shows that since the 2000s have been the dominant global narrative about the city. We show how the entertainment industry has traumatised victims by displacing and denying atrocities, as well as by placing Medellín in the symbolic universe of a 'deviant city'.

The core argument of the article is that global imaginaries of atrocities are a deeply stratified phenomenon where powerful actors – in this case those involved in the global entertainment industry – are able to impose their accounts on local narratives in processes of collective memory construction. The findings challenge the common assumption that visibility is an intrinsically positive acknowledgement of victims of violence (Karstedt 2010). Instead, we suggest that collective memory making, when embedded in the global capitalist economy, can result in re-victimisation and erect barriers that prevent certain events and groups of victims being included in the 'common we'.

## ATROCITIES, MEMORY, AND MEDIA

Recent decades have witnessed growing criminological interest in the power of images and an acknowledgement that the discipline 'needs to rethink its relations with the ascendant power of spectacle' (Carrabine 2012: 463). Media representations are important for our understandings of crime because they are part of 'popular criminology', where 'film is one of the primary sources (albeit an unscientific one) through which people get their ideas about the nature of crime' (Rafter 2007: 417). As Carrabine (2014: 134–5) points out, 'dynamics of celebrity, criminality, desire, fame, trauma and voyeurism' play a significant role in the production, consumption, and interpretation of mediated accounts of violence (see also Greer and McLaughlin 2011). Previous criminological scholarship has also established the importance of visual representations for the understanding of past conflicts and the recognition of their victims. In their ex-

ploration of films on genocide, [Brown and Rafter \(2013: 1028\)](#) stress the importance of visual representation for the building of collective memories, which are essential to the vitality of a group because ‘they are the way the group understands its own history and are central to social thinking’.

In Colombia criminology virtually disappeared in the 1990s, only reappearing in a fragmented form in the late 2010s ([Carrington et al. 2019](#)). Consequently studies on atrocities, media and memory have mainly been carried out by other disciplines. Most Colombian studies on collective memories of atrocities focus on political violence which, problematically, excludes narco-violence. As [Giraldo \(2011\)](#) points out, the main focus of such research is on the perpetrators (paramilitaries, guerrillas and the state); the victims (vulnerable civil society groups such as Indigenous peoples and non-male persons); and the role of young people in the creation of collective memory of the conflict (see also [Riaño-Alcalá 2010](#)). There is, therefore, little research on collective memory of narco-violence (for an exception see [Aristizabal 2018](#)). Of the 104 books published by the National Centre of Historical Memory between 2008 and 2021<sup>2</sup>, only one deals with narco-violence in Medellín ([Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2017](#)).

Nevertheless, during the past few years there has been growing scholarly interest in Colombia in the cultural legacy of narco-violence, and particularly in the role of the media in creating collective memory. For instance, [Pobutsky \(2013: 684\)](#) documents how the popularity of narco-shows in Colombia added to the plethora of Escobar-themed bestsellers, which provide anecdotal, intimate narratives about the drug lord and his lifestyle, overshadow national and local efforts to remember the Cartels as a tragedy. Similarly, [Andrade and colleagues \(2021: 213\)](#) argue that TV series such as *Pablo Escobar: El patron del mal*<sup>3</sup> have helped create a glamorous ‘narco-aesthetic’. For example, the Historical Museum of the Colombian National Police, which sets out to commemorate the fight against drug trafficking has, ironically, become a temple of narco-relics. While these Colombian and other (see e.g., [Pobutsky 2020](#)) academic contributions are valuable for understanding the creation of collective memory surrounding narco-violence, they lack systematic engagement with the role of global media and commercialism.

Seeking to fill this gap, this article outlines the intricate dynamics of silencing and hyper-visibility that shape the present terrain of the collective memory of atrocities in Medellín. It documents the importance of the global capitalist economy in the mediated construction of atrocities, a factor that has received scant scholarly attention. [Stoneman and Packer’s \(2020\)](#) study provides an important insight into the profit-oriented nature of true-crime documentaries, showing how such shows economically profit from voyeurism—the pleasure viewers derive from witnessing atrocities. Even more pertinent to the goal of the present study is [Fraser and Li’s \(2017: 218\)](#) exploration of how cities with past associations with violence and illegality ‘struggle to cast off the shackles of their public image’ due to, among other, the global economic influence of movies, documentaries and science fiction. In a social dynamic resembling that of contemporary Medellín, the authors demonstrate how the traumatic cultural memory of Kowloon Walled City ‘became untethered from the place itself, and recast in the realm of “real virtuality” in a logic in which ‘consumerism and commodification figure in memorialisation’ (229).

In the case of Medellín, there is a complex dynamic whereby powerful global actors are able to make its traumatic past hyper visible, while at the same time appropriating and changing the very meaning of its trauma, making it into entertainment. The article reveals the power of

2 The Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica is a product of the 2005 peace process with the paramilitaries and has been central to the researching and production of collective memory of political violence in Colombia. Its publications are freely available at <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/libros/> (accessed 21 June 2021).

3 *Pablo Escobar: The Lord of Evil* (our translation).

commercialism and global capitalism to shape the lived realities of the city, and to form international perceptions of victimhood and victim communities.

## VICTIMHOOD, CULTURAL TRAUMA AND THE TRAUMA ECONOMY

Culturally traumatic events are deeply embedded in everyday life and the language that shapes social imaginations of trauma. Cultural trauma is, as Jeffrey Alexander (2004: 8) points out, a product of 'a socially mediated attribution' where events become imagined as traumatic as they occur or through a post-hoc process of reconstruction. Cultural trauma is primarily an empirical, scientific concept but is also fundamentally related to questions of social solidarity and social responsibility:

It is by constructing cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the experience and source of human suffering but 'take on board' some significant responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the suffering of others (Alexander 2004: 1).

Following this view, a large body of recent scholarship has argued that removing layers of repressed trauma and bringing greater visibility to victims can contribute to national and transnational justice and reconciliation processes (Brants 2013; Karstedt 2010). Globalisation has thus been seen as conducive to the cosmopolitanisation of memory (Beck et al. 2009). This argument suggests that, by developing globally shared imaginaries of atrocity, transnational agents not only develop institutional structures for bringing perpetrators to justice (Lohne 2019) but also for building global ethical communities around shared narratives of violence and mourning (Skillington 2013). Commemorations of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, for instance, contribute to the 'moral instruction of global audiences' (Skillington 2013: 502).

However, previous scholarship has richly documented how only some experiences of trauma evoke recognition, sympathy and aid, while others remain in the shadows (Tomsy 2011). An important reason for this unequal distribution of trauma recognition is that the concept of trauma intersects with various 'linkages of power relations or forces from the local to international realms of social and political action' and that 'the ability to participate in these debates [of trauma recognition] depends on positioning, whether geopolitical, communal, or individual' (Caple James 2004: 128–9). One of the central power linkages of trauma is that with the global economic system. Lerner (2018) has therefore called for an analysis of collective trauma not only regarding its 'sociocultural and psychological impact' (550) but also within the framework of more tangible economic relations, focusing on 'distinguishing who possesses the resources to "work through" traumas from those who do not' (551).

A vital factor in the power struggles surrounding collective trauma is the fact that traumatic memories are open to commodification. As Sturken (2007: 4) points out, there is a complex relationship between mourning and consumerism, which appears in the 'economic networks that emerge around historical events, including events of trauma'. Traumatic experiences do not escape the dominant global consumerist culture but are, instead, in fundamental ways shaped by it. According to Sturken (2007: 10), trauma consumerism offers the opportunity to experience history, with its many discomforts, from the position of *tourists*, i.e., as 'innocent outsiders, mere observers whose actions are believed to have no effect on what they see'. For 'tourists of history' consumerism provides a safe experience through the 'purchasing of souvenirs at sites of loss such as Ground Zero as a means of expressing sorrow at the lives lost there, without try-

ing to understand the contexts of volatile world politics that produced the attacks' (ibid.). Such combinations of trauma, consumerism and tourism have profound material effects and can lead to the *branding* of an entire city in terms of traumatic memory and violent conflict (see Volcic et al. 2014 for a discussion of such branding in Sarajevo).

Because of its marketability, trauma intersects with other capitalist power structures, ensuring that 'representations of trauma continually circulate, and in that circulation enable or disable awareness of particular traumatic experiences across space and time' (Tomskey 2011: 49). The concept of trauma economy draws attention to the fact that 'traveling memory is determined by capitalism' and that the privilege of narrating and re-narrating trauma is determined by 'economic, cultural, discursive and political structures that guide, enable and ultimately institutionalize the representation, travel and attention to certain traumas' (ibid.: 53).

In this article we will show that the profit motive can, among other things, lead to the unequal distribution of cosmopolitan solidarity or the exclusion of certain groups of victims from it. The trauma economy in several ways challenges perspectives on the cosmopolitization of memory (Beck et al. 2009), which see the global remembrance of atrocities as a form of collective commemoration and acknowledgement of victims' legitimacies (Skillington 2013). The complex impact of global capitalism on the transmission of memories of atrocities undermines cosmopolitan aspirations in several ways. We will show how the privilege of narrating the traumatic events that took place in Medellín in the 1980s and 1990s has been appropriated by powerful global actors that have turned them into a profitable commodity and have effectively distributed them to global audiences. In the process, the meaning of those events has been radically changed: narratives of atrocities have been turned into entertainment. The question thus arises whether the trauma economy can still be defined as such when, in the process of commercial exchange, traumatic events are commodified as entertainment. What are the effects of this process of global commercial appropriation on the victims and local identities? Where, if at all, are there possibilities for resistance?

## METHODS

The empirical material for this article was gathered by various qualitative methods between March 2019 and November 2020. We undertook (1) participant observation of the dynamics of the city, (2) interviews with Medellín's taxi drivers, (3) media analysis, (4) interviews with individuals actively involved in collective memory construction and (5) 26 interviews with residents of Medellín with memories of narco-violence. Participant observation was conducted at sites of dark tourism and in other locations connected to the drug cartels and Pablo Escobar. The observations produced handwritten notes and a variety of photographic materials which were useful for analysing the materiality of dark tourism. We conducted 12 interviews with randomly chosen taxi drivers that provided insights into this and into the wider discourses dominating the social imaginary of the city. These interviews helped us to identify important contextual elements of the impact of narco-shows, dark tourism, and the identity of Medellín. Examination of the media included a thematic analysis of *Narcos* (a Netflix series that first aired in 2015) and a database of 62 news clips reporting violent events connected to drug cartels in Medellín from 1980 to 2001.

Interviews with individuals involved in memory construction included the personal secretary of the mayor of Medellín (2016–20), a journalist working for the programme *Medellín abraza su historia* (Medellín embraces its history), several producers working on *Narcos*, two creators of the Colombian TV series *Pablo Escobar: El Patron del Mal*, and the founder of NarcosLab, an independent initiative to remember the narco-violence in Medellín. We also gained access to information from the Town Hall of Medellín (2016–20) in the form of official communications on dark tourism and official, but not publicly available, statistics.



The residents we interviewed lived in Medellín when the cartels were highly active (ca. 1976–93). Some of the 26 interviewees can be classed as indirect victims (Walklate 2007), although with significant differences among them. Eleven of them witnessed violent events such as car bombings or suffered from constant fear. Fifteen of the interviewees were directly affected by the violence through the loss a relative (usually a parent or spouse) or were impacted by being kidnapped or physically and psychologically injured.

The project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, the national entity responsible for privacy, which gave ethical approval for the research activities of the two authors. Since data was collected in Colombia, we also complied with Colombian legal requirements concerning research ethics. We obtained informed consent from all interviewees, after explaining the purpose of the project in Spanish. We took measures, such as debriefing and follow-up conversations, to avoid re-victimisation due to the sensitive nature of the interviews and the vulnerability of some of the interviewees. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Because of ethical considerations, we anonymised all the interviewees except for the mayor of Medellín's personal secretary. We analysed the data using the software Atlas.ti, guided by the premises of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994).

### THE VIOLENT PAST AS A COMMODITY

As already mentioned, at one period in its turbulent history, Medellín was the most violent city in the world. Colombia was plagued by violence throughout the 20th century, whether because of the civil war between the Liberal and Conservative parties, or the animosity between Marxist guerrilla groups, paramilitary groups and the government, but the 'violence in Medellín in the 1980s greatly exceeded levels of violence in the rest of the country' (Maclean 2015: 29). This was connected to the growing power of the Colombian drug cartels. The Medellín cartel 'at its height controlled 60 per cent of the world's cocaine', and using this wealth, it established a 'substantial and enduring power base' that enabled the cartel to employ 'the disenfranchised youth of Medellín's barrios as *sicarios* [young assassins]' (Maclean 2015: 39–40). The violence perpetrated by the Medellín cartel included car bombs and the assassination of police officers, judges and even a presidential candidate. Car bombs were part of the repertoire of Pablo Escobar's struggle with the state to prevent his extradition to the United States (Aristizábal 2018). At the peak of cartel activity, there were 375 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in the city, which is 'more than 35 times the World Health Organization's definition of epidemic violence' (Maclean 2015: 2).

During the 1980s and 1990s, it was mainly local newspapers that undertook the daily task of narrating the terrible tale of cartel violence. As revealed by the sample newspaper articles we collected, and in stark contrast to the global narratives that emerged later, the focus of local newspapers was on victims and events rather than on perpetrators, highlighting the suffering and destruction caused by attacks and providing details about the tragic incidents, with little mention of Escobar himself. Similarly, Aristizábal's (2018: 19) analysis of 390 newspaper reports from that time shows that journalists described the time as 'a dire period characterised by blood, destruction and death', rather than displaying the current fascination with Escobar's personality.

Considering the amount of violence that took place in Medellín, it is unsurprising that most interviewees who witnessed it expressed strong feelings of despair in connection with that period. As a male private guard (early 60s) said, 'Those of us who lived during that period remember the past with dread'. For a taxi driver this was a dramatic and traumatic time:

That period left a trauma in me, there was always anxiety because one was 'just living' and suddenly 'boom'; I experienced that and I had many close friends and relatives that died during those bombings (taxi driver 4).

Traumatic memories often had a sensory association. As [McClanahan and South \(2020: 3\)](#) point out, the range of human sensations are highly significant for criminology because all sensorial activity ‘condition[s] and configure[s] human interpretation and meaning-making’ (see also [Herrity et al. 2021](#)). Memories were often expressed in *visual* terms:

What I remember is the tragedy [...], a city in flames and constant alarm. A time of not knowing when there would be another attack, another bomb; the sensation of going out in the streets and finding corpses lying there (male schoolteacher, late 40s).

Memories were also connected to *sound*: ‘there was the noise of the bombs and the ambulances around the city all the time; there was constant tension’ (taxi driver, early 50s). *Smell* also played a significant role in the accounts of direct witnesses: ‘I remember going to school [...] and there were corpses there, I could smell the blood, but I had to keep walking because I did not want to see if the body was of someone I knew’ (unemployed man, early 40s). Intertwined with memories of suffering were recollections of considerable economic activity: ‘a lot of pain, a lot of fear, many murders, but also a lot of money’ (housewife, late 60s).

All our interviewees had memories of victimisation, either through a violent act perpetrated against them or a loved one, or through constant fear and trauma. Stories of loved ones falling prey to narco-violence were common: ‘Several of my friends were kidnapped to be trained as hit men; two cousins also died due to that violence’, (male private guard, early 60s). This fear led to changed habits as well as deeply embedded trauma:

I stopped watching the news for a long time because I was very traumatised. I experienced bad headaches, an unspeakable pain, intense fear. I am sure that you have heard these words many times: ‘We knew we would go out of our homes, but we did not know whether we would come back’, (female fashion designer, late 50s).

Almost three decades after the peak of the narco-violence, a series of TV shows inspired by the lives of the most famous Colombian drug lords were aired on local open channels and became widely consumed entertainment products. The initial productions were Colombian – series such as *Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del mal* (2012), which had a distinctly local flavour and combined US crime drama with the South American telenovela. However, because of its commercial success, Escobar’s story was soon globalised and today is dominated by US actors, particularly Netflix. This US-based corporation adapted the Colombian productions for Western consumption by fitting them into the familiar narrative of the heroic agents of the US Drug Enforcement Agency saving the world from exotic foreign threats ([Rincón 2018](#)). Released on 28 August 2015, by 2018 *Narcos* was the most watched show on the Netflix platform ([Vicedo 2018](#)) and was also made into a popular spin-off series set in Mexico.

As a genre, narco-shows have undergone a major transformation, shaped by an interplay of national and global influences. Our interviews with series creators and producers of the Colombian show *Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del Mal* revealed the strong influence of US mob dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *The Godfather*, in which the personality of the mafia boss is of central importance. Narco-series in a similar way combine ‘the otherworldliness of the gangster lifestyle’ with familiar tropes such as work, family dynamics, stress and personal demons ([Vincent 2008: 5](#)), without passing judgement on the violent actions of their protagonists. As we shall see below, several of Escobar’s victims saw this as deeply problematic.

In addition to revealing intricate global–local interconnections, the development of the narco genre also shows the constant displacements that take place in the process of memory creation. *El Patrón del Mal*, according to one of its producers (whose parents were murdered by Escobar’s

cartel), aimed to 'show the points of view of widows, politicians, and children', but *Narcos* set out 'to show the perspective of the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] with a very North American point of view' (interview with *Narcos* producer A). According to the producer 'there was no interest in being rigorous with the content, but the goal was to entertain and make a profit'.

In what follows, we show that, for inhabitants of Medellín, including the local authorities, witnesses and victims of narco-violence, this commercial logic represented a significant issue in terms of remembering the city's traumatic past.

### From trauma to entertainment

The complex conjunction of the logics of global capitalism and collective memory construction in Medellín is visible on several levels and was clearly expressed in interviews with victims, as well as in the actions of city officials. Several of the interviewees who had lost family members to the violence refused point-blank to watch any narco shows. Several described doing so as painful and disrespectful to victims, and resented their friends and acquaintances abroad who were fascinated by the shows.

So, I don't agree with those series. And even less do I like the fact that here in Colombia they have used them as something to exploit, to profit from and export worldwide. To me, that is like a lack of respect for all the people who died because of all these situations (a man widowed by narco-violence).

Many victims see the shows as the most prominent public narrative about the terrible events and are thus deeply upset by their historical inaccuracies, particularly as they relate to their loved ones. A female interviewee who lost her father said:

I asked a friend to send me the episode where they recreate the attack on my dad. I was outraged. It bothered me because my dad never ran. [...] if you want to do a series, try to get closer and try to investigate. [...] Try not to offend the victims and try not to offend the history of a country. Because it can get confusing. Although they say, 'this series does not correspond to reality'. It makes me angry; it annoys me, it makes me angry.

In addition to historical inaccuracies, the victims were upset by the shows' focus on, and idealisation of, the perpetrators rather than the victims. Having the perpetrators as the heroes of the story felt deeply wrong:

I confess that I am not a follower of those series because I do not wish to excuse crime. What I am looking for is the opposite. We want that story told, but from the victims' perspective. Not exalting the criminal. But showing how good life could have been for these four magistrates who fought against drug trafficking (a man orphaned by narco-violence).

The statement points to a key displacement that takes place when the tragic story of the city is told by the entertainment industry: the seriousness of victims' suffering is undermined because the focus is on the violent, but glamorous, figures of the perpetrators. As one reviewer of *Narcos* observed:

Moura [the actor portraying Escobar], with his soft, brown-eyed gaze and youthful face (much better-looking than the real man), makes Escobar so appealing in his self-confidence that it is difficult not to root for him, even as he subtly threatens the children of an army official who initially dares not to be paid off, even as he poses with corpses (McNamara, 2015).



Having drug traffickers as protagonists was a novel perspective in Colombia and was a result of US cultural influence, as one script writer for *Pablo Escobar: El Patron del Mal* explained:

The United States has always been at the forefront of this trend, with *The Godfather* or *The Sopranos*. This was a great inspiration because, having seen *The Sopranos* and having them in the back of my head, was always the biggest influence I had when writing this kind of product.

Paying homage to Hollywood movies such as *Good Fellas*, *Narcos* frames its story as a classic gangster movie (Britto 2016). As Nochimson (2002: 3) points out, one of the main characteristics of the genre is that ‘the protagonists with whom we empathize reverse our usual patterns of identification by engaging us and our feelings with career criminals, often to the exclusion of empathy with law-abiding citizens’.

The portrayal in *Narcos* of Escobar’s life as glamorous is matched by the light tones of the romantic bolero, which is the show’s signature tune, and the intro featuring seductive women. Such narrative framing stands in stark contrast to the intense sensory memories of those directly affected by the violence (the smell of corpses on the streets, the oppressive sound of car bombs and sirens, the daily fear of death and destruction). While critics of the show have pointed out its failure to live up to its claims to historical accuracy (Britto 2016), attention should also be paid to the sensory aspects of its narrative. Our interviewees were critical of *Narcos* not only for idealising Escobar, but for idealising and glossing over violence more generally. The widow of one of Escobar’s victims said:

I think those shows should not mock the pain of others as they do. But beyond that, the problem is the way they are selling those shows, they are not contributing to society, they are normalising violence. They are portraying the villains as if they were the heroes.

The global productions, therefore, do not simply profit from tragic events, but in the process change the very meaning of traumatic experiences by turning tragedy into entertainment and imbuing violence with light and playful qualities.

The profitability of the trauma economy built on Escobar’s mythology<sup>4</sup> is not only a symbolic phenomenon but is a material part of the lived realities of the city’s residents. As we show below, Medellín’s inhabitants are drawn into a dark commercial web centred around the ‘Escobar experience’. A close relative of one of Escobar’s victims explained how upsetting these commercial activities were to him:

Something that affects me is seeing T-shirts with a photo of him taken by the police. And stickers on the taxis of the *comunas* [shanty towns]. That makes me feel offended. That does hurt. The guy is a criminal, completely brutal. Them defending him, celebrating and admiring him, having him as a role-model offends me.

Our interviewees also expressed concern about how the heavily gendered portrayals of characters in narco-shows affected young people. A male lawyer (late 40s) said: ‘Boys just want to become hit men’. A taxi driver thought TV shows like *Sin Tetas no hay Paraíso* [Without Tits There is no Paradise] that feature women experiencing narco-violence result in ‘girls from very young ages think[ing] that their virginity is worth a lot of money. [...] Foreigners come looking for those girls to feel like Pablo Escobar’ (taxi driver 2).

4 Whereas Netflix does not reveal how many times its products have been watched, the website Parrot Analytics has created a tool to measure their popularity: Demand Expression, ranked *Narcos* as Netflix’s most popular product, with 29 million expressions of interest (Vicedo 2018: 146). This means that *Narcos* is an important component of Netflix’s yearly USD 5.77 billion revenue (Alexander 2020).

### Dark tourism and the impossibility of forgetting

Resentment about narco-series, therefore, extends beyond their cinematic representations to the impact that they are perceived to have on the cultural decline of the city via the growth of dark tourism. In the words of one interviewee, '*Narcos* is producing a wave of foreigners who come to do sexual tourism, seeking all kinds of drugs and to live the life of Pablo Escobar' (male engineer, early 40s). The number of tourist tours to sites of violence and the landmarks of Escobar's activity has mushroomed in recent years. A tour offered by [Lonely Planet \(2020\)](#), e.g., is advertised thus:

Discover what life was like for the Colombian drug lord, Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria. Explore the mansion where he housed his hobbies, the site of his death and his final resting place. This private 3-hour tour will give you an in-depth look at the 'king of cocaine's' past and effects he left on his community. [...] Head to 'Los Olivos', the neighbourhood where Pablo Escobar, one of the most well-known Colombian drug lords, was murdered. Visit the Monaco's building where you will admire its elegant marble front.

The number of foreign tourists in Medellín has increased: in 2008, 270,000 people visited the city, by 2018 the number had risen to 823,247, of whom 39 per cent were foreign.<sup>5</sup> Taxi drivers we interviewed reported they got frequent requests to go to sites associated with the cartels: 'They ask about touristic sites, they obviously ask about drug trafficking, about where they can buy sex, buy drugs, where the clubs and the ladies are', (taxi driver 7). Tourists frequently choose Pablo Escobar as the topic of conversation, as one driver explained: 'due to the load of TV shows and movies that have portrayed Medellín as violent [...], there are many foreigners wanting to learn more about that lifestyle', (taxi driver 4).

In the fully scripted Pablo Escobar Family Tour we took, the tone was light and the guides even attempted to be comic. One of them impersonated Escobar. The emphasis was on glorifying Escobar, highlighting the drug lord's qualities and good deeds and exalting him as 'the third richest man in the world'. He was described as 'clever, crazy, and a polyglot', while the extreme violence was mainly blamed on his opponents. The tour also stopped at Escobar's tomb (see [Figure 1](#)), where how greatly he was venerated and his high social status were clear. The highly symbolic placing of his ostentatious grave next to the church shows the strength of a social hierarchy in which a drug lord has the coveted spot near the church, with a view of the city, while the graves of the poor are put elsewhere. The number of tourists there when we visited also indicated that the grave has become a site of pilgrimage. The tour also included a visit to the Pablo Escobar Museum, run by members of his family, which had a souvenir shop selling Escobar coffee cups, t-shirts, caps, keyrings and other tourist items.

There are, however, tours with a different tone and perspective. The guide on our second tour was an ex-police officer who described his memories of the violent period. Although his account was the opposite of the first one, this tour was also part of the growing Escobar tourism industry: our guide had even appeared in a Netflix show on dark tourism. This tour took in the neighbourhood built by Escobar, where there is a large mural of him on the main street (see [Figure 2](#)) and a small, improvised Escobar Museum, built and run by the community. Although dramatically different in tone, both tours were commercially sustained by selling Escobar's story and revealed how deeply embedded it has become in Medellín's economy.

As shown by the growth of scholarship on dark tourism, crime has a powerful appeal to tourists ([Dalton 2015](#)), though the commodification of pain for popular consumption has often been controversial ([Ystehede 2016](#)). Sometimes, as [Dalton \(2015: 1\)](#) points out, 'the author-

5 Information provided by the sub-secretary of Medellín in a written communication in 2019.



Fig. 1. Escobar's grave

ities intervene to deter morbidly curious tourists from visiting sites of crime'. Other sites, particularly those of genocide, mass murder, terrorist attacks and state-sanctioned torture and human rights violations, are deemed so important that they warrant deliberate commemoration and memorialisation, and become places of therapeutic mourning for survivors, families and the general public (Dalton 2015). Medellín does not belong to this category. While the gravity of Escobar's crimes would certainly warrant intervention to stem the flow of tourists morbidly fascinated by his toxic entrepreneurialism, the 'Escobar experience' threatens to engulf the city and re-shape it through its narrative, causing great distress to those affected by his crimes.

### 'RESPECT OUR PAIN, HONOUR OUR VICTIMS'

These developments have not gone unchallenged. A different voice joined in the struggle to shape the narrative of the past when, in 2016, the newly elected mayor of Medellín put the issue on his political agenda and raised concerns about the narratives that had been constructed about the city's violent past. Gutiérrez and his team decided to demolish the Monaco building, one of Escobar's residences. According to his personal secretary, Manuel Villa Mejia, the mayor decided 'to make the demolition a symbolic event and to build a space there to honour the victims of the tragedy; a space to build memory'. However, the site of the Monaco building continues to attract Escobar aficionados, and on one of the guided tours we took, the guide vehemently declared, 'This will never be Peace park, this place will always belong to Pablo Escobar!' It was telling that one of our interviewees, who had lost her husband to cartel violence, described a disagreement with a taxi driver on her way to the ceremony at the Monaco building. He was worried that its demolition might bring a loss of income from tourism.





Fig. 2. Large Pablo Escobar mural on a wall in the Pablo Escobar neighbourhood

I told him that drug tourism is not good for you and your children, for your grandchildren, that is not good, you have to look for other sources of income, you have to look at alternatives. No, he did not agree with that and spoke ill of the mayor who had done it. I, at least, agreed [with the mayor] and I congratulated him. I told him, 'Your idea seems very good to me'. You have to get rid of it, knock it down, because you have to remove that shadow. So, it seemed to me it [the tours of the building] was like a lack of respect. Unconsciously, everyone was getting involved in that. [...] There were a number of people living around it and living off it. So, I don't agree with that.

In addition to demolishing the Monaco, Gutiérrez's plans included closing a museum operated by Escobar's brother, discouraging narco-tours and updating and strengthening the Museo Casa de la Memoria (House of Memory Museum). The mayor also made strenuous attempts to defeat the global mythmaking surrounding Escobar. Gutiérrez sent letters to Netflix and to international artists declaring that 'endorsing drug trafficking, Pablo, and his violence is a huge act of irresponsibility'. He also wrote an official letter to the Colombian ambassador in France, asking her to work for the closure of the Parisian restaurant Le Baron, which offered 'dishes with names of Escobar's hit men and ceremonies called "plata o plomo" or "the death exchange"'.<sup>6</sup>

The above examples show that Pablo Escobar still casts a long shadow over Medellín, a city constantly confronted by the hyper-visibility of its violent past. The city's strategy of resistance has been two-fold: (1) to create a different, more dignified and victim-focused account of its past and (2) to try to limit the corrosive impact of narco-violence on the cultural values of the

<sup>6</sup> 'Carta a Farruko y Victor Manuelle' [Letter to Farruko and Victor Manuelle] (n.d.) and letter to Vivian Morales (2018) from Federico Gutiérrez.

city, particularly those of its younger generation. According to Villa, 'The system of illegality is still there, there is still corruption, there is still money laundering, there is still criminality'.

Medellín's local strategies of resistance to the global narrative grew out of a sense of anger and unease at the way the city was represented and, ultimately, stigmatised. Several victims of drug violence have felt impelled to write blogs or books to get their story heard. According to Villa, the intention of the city's authorities is to send a message to the world: 'Respect our pain, honour our victims'. Inspired by commemorations of the Holocaust, Medellín's authorities have tried to develop a more dignified and sober narrative that resembles and joins with other commemorations of atrocities.

The local policies developed by the Town Hall, although critical of the narratives developed by the entertainment industry, have been very much shaped by global influences and are intended to be a part of a global discussion. The mayor made this clear in the speech he gave before the demolition of the Monaco building:

It is important to know what has happened in the world, to have a correct perspective [of the conflict in Medellín]: the memorial in Hiroshima, the memorial of 9/11 in New York, the memory of Auschwitz, the memorial to the Jews in Berlin, the memorial to the veterans in Washington.<sup>7</sup>

The most visible step in the attempt to tell an alternative story of the city was the upgrading of the Museo Casa de la Memoria. Though smaller, architecturally, the museum resembles the Jewish Museum in Berlin. As stated on its website, its aim is not only to remember the past, but to become a space for developing alternative visions of the future, as part of society's peace-building efforts: 'We are Living Memories, see to not repeat. This space is a house of dialogue and encounter to understand what happened and is happening in our society, to rediscover hope and to think about other possible futures' (*Museo Casa de la Memoria*, n. d.). During the process of expanding and upgrading the museum, Medellín officials visited Holocaust museums around the world seeking inspiration. According to Villa, the policy of the city authorities has been to 'look back, retell the story and change the referents. To retell the story from the side of the truth, from the side of the victims, from the side of the heroes'. Their objective has been to build a narrative that competes with that of the entertainment industry and 'make sexy and appealing those characters that stood up to resist it'.

These efforts, however, have also met criticism and opposition. While some victims we interviewed were supportive of the mayor's efforts, others felt that the local authorities, too, were silencing them. A brother of a youngster killed by Escobar's cartel in 1990 said:

This is all politics, and people do not realise that they are being used. During the demolition of the Monaco building, Gutiérrez asked us to go on the stage for a picture; I thought we would have the chance to use the microphone and tell our stories. But it was only him [Gutiérrez] who got to talk. That event was a business matter for a lot of people, and Gutiérrez profited politically from it. He used us; he used the victims.

The city's efforts to develop an alternative narrative of its past has been obstructed by the same dynamic that caused it in the first place, namely, the strength of global commercial and cultural forces promoting fascination with Escobar. When trying to find the Museo Casa de la Memoria

<sup>7</sup> Intervención del alcalde de Medellín: Homenaje a Héroes y Víctimas del Narcoterrorismo y Derribo del Edificio Mónaco [Intervention of the mayor of Medellín: Homage to Heroes and Victims of Narco-Terrorism and Demolition of the Mónaco Building] (2019).



during our field work, we discovered that it was largely unknown to locals, taxi drivers and visitors. This alternative narrative was, in fact, not easy to locate. Our perception was confirmed by statistics provided by the Town Hall showing that, in 2018, only 1.7 per cent of visitors to the city's museums went to the Museo Casa de la Memoria. A cursory examination of popular websites such as Tripadvisor.com showed that, while Museum Pablo Escobar is ranked by visitors as the third most popular attraction in the city, Museo Casa de la Memoria comes eleventh.

## THE GLOBAL HIERARCHIES OF VICTIMHOOD

As in several Latin American countries today, the homicide numbers in Medellín during the 1980s and 1990s make the violence there comparable to a civil war, which makes theoretical distinctions between criminality and warfare difficult to apply (Franko 2020). This article has shown that in Medellín, as elsewhere, the process of translating violent conflict into memory has in important ways been shaped by the media and popular culture. Collective pasts are, as Neiger et al. (2011: 1) point out, 'narrated by the media, through the use of the media, and about the media'. An important line of recent scholarship has shown how memories and narratives of extreme violence do not exist in isolation but co-exist in the public sphere and, ultimately, shape each other (Rothberg 2009). Memories of individual histories are thus not easily separable from each other, but emerge dialogically, and as described above, have in recent decades been seen to contribute to cosmopolitanisation (Beck et al. 2009).

In this article we have shown that, while the local authorities in Medellín have been eager to join the cosmopolitan discourse on memory transmission and processes of mourning, their efforts have largely been unsuccessful due to the incorporation of their traumatic past into the logics of the global entertainment industry and commercialism. They have not managed to clearly establish an alternative cultural experience or reshape the content of the global commercial mythmaking surrounding Escobar. For that reason, the mayor's personal secretary angrily compared Medellín's situation with that of similar violent locations, arguing that, while victims in Northern societies receive sympathy and solidarity, Medellín is treated as a source of entertainment:

The United States had their twin towers destroyed, in Europe there have been recent attacks, and in the Second World War there was a brilliantly evil character; [similarly] thirty years ago we had planes sent to the ground, we had bombs, we had a brilliantly evil character, why does the whole world solidarise with the Jews, with the Germans, with the USA, with France, Spain and England, but not with us?

His words indicate a belief in a global hierarchy of victimhood (Franko 2021), where tragic events in the countries of the global North are given a different kind of attention and commemoration. As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) point out, in Western cultures trauma has become a major social signifier in social narrations of past violence, but this is far from the case in Medellín. Escobar's victims face the fear that their losses are, as one of the victims put it, 'closed in a capsule of oblivion', but they also have to repeatedly confront the commercial forces glorifying the perpetrator and turning their tragic story into entertainment. The fact that these commercial forces are reshaping the city they live in leaves them feeling not only voiceless, but also constantly re-victimised.

These dynamics also challenge Rothberg's (2009: 3) hypothesis that 'memory works *productively* through negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing; the result of memory conflict is not less memory, but more—even of subordinated memory traditions'. The logic by which the global entertainment industry has excluded Medellín's past from global commemoration

has meant narrating its history in terms of gangsterism and a culture of violence. Particularly in postcolonial contexts, gender, cultural and racial stereotypes and gangsterism are drawn on to link violence to cultural identity (Evans 2020; Hastie 2020). Such an approach, often dependent on cultural essentialism, locates the problem in historically established patterns of behaviour and 'lets politics and politicians off the hook' (Scott 1997 in Evans 2020: 57). *Narcos* thus offers little critical reflection on the role of the US-sponsored war on drugs in the escalation of violence in Medellín, while framing the story as a case of 'Colombian magic realism' (as stated in its title sequence). In that respect, as Hachenberger (2019) points out, *Narcos* promotes US cultural values while putting in place negative portrayals of Latinos as the perceived ethnic Other.

Medellín and its culture are thus transformed from victims to collective culprits. By equating the city with violent Latino criminality, the violence experienced by its inhabitants becomes a sign of their exotic otherness and, therefore, reinforces their abjection and exclusion from the cosmopolitan 'we'. What is experienced as painful memories by the city's inhabitants does not elicit global solidarity and identification but is turned into a source of pleasure and entertainment for global audiences.

## CONCLUSION: MEMORY, VOICE AND POWER IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY

The global market economy allots very uneven narrative power to those engaged in processes of memory construction. This article has shown how local actors are left with little power to influence the social narration of their traumatic past. They are unable to prevent its transformation into a profitable source of entertainment and commercialism for tourists and global audiences, and find themselves excluded from the global victim community. The deep inequality between North and South and the pervasive influence of the United States, which determine the global management of narcotics (Andreas and Nadelmann 2006), are thus, on a cultural level, reflected in the obliteration of the suffering of Southern victims of narco-violence and the resonance of colonial stereotyping and fascination with violent Latino gangsterism.

The findings of the article reveal several paradoxical and socially problematic consequences of the influence of the global entertainment industry on memory building in the global South and reflect the complexity of contemporary global interconnections (Franko 2020). Since World War Two, the social position of victims in transitional justice has been marked, as Susanne Karstedt (2010: 9) observes, by a road from absence to presence, and from invisibility to visibility, but this is far from the case in Medellín. Here, the extraordinary violence of the 1980s and 1990s has been marked by the hyper-visibility and global fame of the perpetrators and the silencing of victims' voices. Although the international community has been supportive of the Colombian peace process (Cujabante Villamil 2016; Goyes 2015), on the assumption that reconciliation with its legacy of large-scale abuses is possible, Colombia's violence is also a source of profit for both local and international actors. The global political economy grants the entertainment industry a privileged position in the narration of history and, as a by-product, undermines the aspirations that shape cosmopolitan discourse on human rights and transitional justice. Although collective recognition of trauma can be conducive to social solidarity and provide acknowledgement of shared responsibility (Alexander 2004), in Medellín these processes are undermined by commercial and cultural forces which silence the suffering of its inhabitants and promote imaginations of violent Latino otherness.

This article reveals the resentment felt by Medellín's political authorities and by inhabitants who have experienced violence, at the lack of respect for their suffering and the perceived denial of their cosmopolitan aspirations. Historically, as Karstedt (2010) says, groups of victims have been silenced immediately after a conflict, but have eventually achieved recognition. However, in the case of Medellín, the road to having one's voice heard is filled with obstacles. According

to Zelizer (2011), the influence of Western media outlets leads to the minimisation of local mnemonic impulses, in favour of formulaic and accessible narratives, which results in the cannibalisation of memory. Victims' narratives are thus in danger of being 'eaten up' both by powerful global commercial actors, and by national and local political ones. The traumatic consequences of narco-violence are thus not recognised as such, but are turned into profit by the entertainment industry and various commercial and political actors. Moreover, the global entertainment industry, through its symbolic representations targeting global audiences, produces material effects locally, by defining Medellín's inhabitants as residents of a 'deviant city', which in the view of our interviewees, prevents the formation of positive future identities. The corrosive effects of narco-shows therefore have direct repercussions for the lived materiality of the city in the form of dark tourism and the aspirational identities of younger generations.

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