



REMEMBERING VIOLENCE IN *MATAR A JESÚS* (2017)

What are ruins? Something diminished, certainly, something demolished. But not everything demolished is a ruin. In the perception of the ruin we sense something that is no longer there, a departed guest: someone has just left when we enter, something still floats in the air and something has remained too. (Zambrano, 2012: 114)

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War ruins, destroys. It dislocates embodied experience from any possible meaning while interrupting processes of identity building and social formations. Events that are violent and traumatic in nature puncture a hole in the linguistic capacities of psychic representation. Memories that are too painful to remember or communicate come to be transmitted roughly, through silences, disjunctions, repetitions, and contradictions. Taking into account the fact that the use of symbolic tools (language, culture) is a precondition for the process in which subjectivity is constructed, the collapse of language implies as well the collapse of the conceptual frameworks that construct our social worlds. Violence as a social phenomenon concerns all matters of politics, identity, physical and psychological wellbeing, and other social activities; and, as such, it is not only defined by the specificity of the context but, in turn, it partakes an active role in the development of the notions of identity. Both in form and content, violence becomes a narrative force that gives shape to our past and, therefore,

to our notions of identity. Indeed, entire histories of countries are summarized in textbooks with timelines and descriptions of the wars they have (or not) endured. However, this belongs to a well precise practice, an academic discipline, and a scientific method: it belongs to History. Violence trespasses this collective sphere of the cultural memory of history, and shapes, deeply shapes, the singular, the individual. My contention is that narratives of violence are mediated by affectual processes of memory, which bring us intimately closer to the different forms of victimization; yet, they obstruct representation by articulating a distant image of that violence.

As a recognized foundation of the Colombian imaginary, conflict has remained for decades the most critical identifier of the nation. In this case, violence represents the dominant discursive formation of Colombian narratives, making it impossible to separate any discussion regarding art from the issue of violence (Suárez 2009). While there have been multiple and diverse attempts at identifying, classifying, and explaining all forms of violence—sometimes by tracing its origins to specific events in Colombian history—defining the roots of a conflict that has come to define a country for over half a century is no easy task, as the complexity and longevity of violence in Colombia remain transversal and are deeply engrained into all of social, cultural, and political dimensions. The history and definition of the Colombian conflict are, to this day, a site of struggle for meaning, and it is precisely such instability of the rhetoric of violence through which we narrate our stories (Barbero and Pécault in Martínez 2012) that consolidates violence as a natural component of the Colombian experience. The naturality and continuity of this violence suggests a permanent state of crisis that does not recognize the pre-traumatic nor post-traumatic experience. Indeed, as Geoffrey Kantaris reminds us, “violence is as much an effect of representation as it is a system of representation itself” (2018: 456) that permeates all national spatial, temporal, and conceptual frameworks. Regarding its discursive formation, the traumatic event is “not assimilated or experienced fully” at the time of its occurrence, but rather “belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.” (Caruth 1995; 4–5). Somewhere in between the articulation

of embodied experience, meaning, and identity, there seems to be a fundamental/constructive tension between the building blocks with which we construct the idea of ourselves, and the broken pieces that are lost, destroyed, or taken from us. Violence then, both in form and content, becomes a narrative force that gives shape to our notions of identity.¹

In Colombian national cinema, the exploration of warlike conflict is mostly evidenced in the narratives that are concerned with violence and the ways in which territory/land issues (the countryside/the city) influences forms of marginalization. The socio-political intersection in which *Matar a Jesús* (2017) unfolds is influenced by the history of the internal armed conflict, geo-politics of inequality and the State's peace-building and neo-liberal projects. In this work, filmmaker Laura Mora Ortega depicts a picture of an outraged (yet hopeless) contemporary Colombian society for which violence, fear, and indignation are constant emotions in face of the State's abandonment. Her exploration of violence is heavily influenced by Victor Gaviria's oeuvre, which became highly recognized by its inclusion of non-professional actors—in this case, a tumultuous youth from marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín—in the writing of the scripts as well as in other narrative processes. *Matar a Jesús*, in particular, develops its narrative at the intersection between guerrilla documentary forms and thriller narrative structures in order to explore the life experiences of the atemporal and faithless youth that is so recurrent in Gaviria's bodywork. *Rodrigo D. No futuro* (1990), for instance, was greatly inspired by Vittorio de Sica's *Umberto D* (1952). Gaviria's famous leitmotif is beautifully exemplified in the exploration of some neorealist themes, such as the social 'paralysis,' or stagnation of life, in which social dynamics come to an abrupt halt, causing characters to internalize feeling of hopelessness, loss, and a lack of purpose in all their social and personal activities.

The portrayal of forgotten and/or wretched characters (sexual minorities, the poor, the outlawed, the undereducated, the abandoned, etc.) is distinctive of 'dirty realism,' coined in Spanish

1. This seems to be a failure of narration because it will never be able to recover the past. However, importance is given to the ways in which narratives are told instead of the historical accuracy of the actual event.

as *realismo sucio*. Moreover, it is precisely through a combination of the documentary techniques of *cinéma vérité*, along with classical fiction formulas, that ‘dirty realism’ (as does Gaviria’s work in general) presents a sober image of characters which are commonly outcast from established social systems and defined as ‘marginal,’ dysfunctional, and politically abject; that is, those characters which—it is believed—should be made invisible in order for society to progress.² Dirty realism’s reinterpretation of Glauber Rocha’s formulation of the aesthetics of hunger during the 1970s, displays the crisis of the modern political project by exposing the fatal costs of economic modernization.

Materializing the belief that “fatality and absurdity are the only ways to represent the experience of violence” (Gaviria 2002: 229), the youth portrayed in *Matar a Jesús* captures the despair of a marginal community in which legal authority barely exists. The indifference through which official institutions disregard marginal communities obstructs them from different forms of social life and political involvement, and points to how “the weakening of the very notion of belonging to society evidences a breakdown of the social bond and the awareness of the inability of the State to guarantee security” (Moraña 2002: 14). In front of the almost inexistent presence of police and legal institutions, the act of political re-formulation emerges, as communities articulate their own notions of truth and justice. In doing so, they are “replicating the institutional discourse transforming themselves into their traumatic image, one that is erased from consciousness but nevertheless works from within” (León 2005: 13). Indeed, the exclusion of social groups from economic and social orders also carries with it the exclusion from epistemic, symbolic, and cultural fields (León). The universality and legitimacy of the established forms of State regulation and other forms of institutionalism are then called into question as institutions “base their rational and universalist discourse on the segregation of certain marginal collectivities” (13). This implies a conception of the marginal as that which is ‘traumatic’ or ‘abject’ to the neoliberal project, “a float-

2. The protagonists in Gaviria’s films such as *La vendedora de rosas* (The Rose Seller) (1998), *Sumas y restas* (2005) are a clear example of this narrative tendency.

ing meaning that designates what was repressed by enlightened thought: the trace of postponed cultures that never spoke the language of the West” (13). Consequently, one is ventured to accept the fact that the emergence of various types of violence (whether local, individual or global and social) can be traced back to a common ‘formal’ and excluding system (Cervino and Cevallos, 2003).

Matar a Jesús follows Paula’s journey through Medellín’s underworld as she desperately—and guided by an initial will of vengeance—tries to discover the truth behind her father’s murder. Paula’s father, professor of political science and avid lecturer of the texts of Michel Foucault, is murdered by a man in a motorcycle who promptly disappears through the busy roads after shooting him. Paula, who witnessed his death, seeks help from the dysfunctional legal system that is a common trope in a large part of Colombian contemporary cinema: the useless local police institution, structured through the figure of incompetent and corrupt law-enforcing agent, and the reality of the poor governmental funding destined to marginal communities. The investigators of the death of Paula’s father (who, the film suggests, steal the father’s watch) are quick to dismiss any resolution of the case while arguing that the large volume of crimes in the neighborhood makes it almost impossible for the police officers to investigate and find the killer. In fact, they advise Paula and her brother that the most viable course of action is for the whole family to pack their belongings and relocate. The family is unwilling to leave the father’s house of which they have fond memories. However, economic matters seem to be of concern. Some days after the traumatic incident, she comes face to face with the person who shot her father. Paula, while dancing with her friends, suddenly recognizes the face of the man who escaped in the motorcycle over the loud music and hypnotic, oneiric-like lights of an underground disco bar. She slowly approaches him and asks his name: His name is Jesús. She writes his phone number down and plans to set up a date in the next days, as soon as she is able to get her hands on a gun and finally satisfy her impulse for revenge. However, buying a gun is not as easy as Paula believes and, while she finds one, she spends time with Jesús, developing an intimate bond which will later prevent her from pulling the trigger. During her experience with Jesús,

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Paula bears witness of the disassociation between the social and moral structure of the marginal community he belongs to.

Here, the filmic text and personal experience are deeply interconnected. As Beverly argues, the cinema that explores themes of marginality has as one of its most important objectives to expose the irreducibility of subaltern culture by means of its testimonial effect (2004). It is important to note that the director herself seems to extrapolate her own experience with personal trauma into the narrative: her father was also the victim of a murder of political nature. While she did not see the face of the person who committed the crime, she affirms to have conceived the plot for *Matar a Jesús* after having a dream in which an unknown man walked up to her and said: “I killed your father, my name is Jesús.” Paula’s experience, in a way, materializes the filmmaker’s personal desire and urgency of finding the answer behind the father’s murder and the catharsis of recognizing (if any) meaning to the violence.

Paula’s journey is a sorrowful one that reflects not only the traumatic experience of Laura Mora Ortega, but of thousands of Colombians who, to this day, do not know the details behind the death/disappearance of their loved ones. In these situations, family members and close friends are left with no answers, trying to find the proper narratives to define the stories of departed loved ones with the use of whatever objects, photos, words, or ideas that remain after the breakdown. Further, these personal memories are framed in a larger universe, a mass media universe in which the war was represented and experienced by millions of Colombian citizens. In this semiotic universe, fragments of pain become image and, through these, we recall the past and we construct our stories. Nevertheless, as remarked by Susan Sontag: “photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas “memories,” and that is, over the long run, a fiction” (Sontag 2003: 85–86). Far from being the history of the conflict, these fragments, pictures, souvenirs, are just the collective representation of the individual pain. Such communal, social interaction completely mediated by the images is, in turn, experienced as a legitimate document of personal trauma and as the proof of history of the depicted violence.

In the case of Paula, the traces of her father will slowly begin to disappear. The only element that remains at all times is his photo, which she carries along in her journey. Indeed, Paula is trying to uncover those unclear details of her father's murder in order to fully determine his story. She is looking for a reason, a cause, a name and a timeline. By inspecting the ruins of his belongings, she hopes to understand exactly what happened. Here, it is important to go beyond a reading of *Matar a Jesús* as a murder thriller plot, but as the primordial objective of trauma narratives: to articulate broken fragments of memory in a way that makes sense.

Photographs are the most important elements of memory in the film. Not only because Paula herself is studying photography, but because they become an indispensable tool in the narrative development. It is noteworthy that Jesús, while deeply treasures a picture of his deceased brother, does not want to be photographed by Paula. In a very important scene where we witness them becoming emotionally intimate with each other, Jesús decides to take her to a beautiful place for her to take some photos. He walks Paula up the small mountain overlooking Medellín that he visits from time to time when he wants to clear his mind and be on his own. After being asked about how her analog camera works, Paula describes the process: you focus and you shoot. Shortly after, she points the camera at Jesús who asks Paula not to take his picture as he loathes the idea of having photos 'lying around.' Jesús' refusal of being photographed points not only to his fear of being on the other side of a shooting object, but most importantly to his refusal of becoming an object of memory. As Susan Sontag reminds us, photographs objectify, "they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality" (81). Jesús only agrees to have his picture taken by Paula after she promises to give him back the photos as soon as she develops them, as if by holding the pictures in his hands granted him full control of any narrative that might be attached to him, both presently and in the future. Jesús wants the means to articulate his own story as he well knows about the fatal challenge that photography poses on memory: "whether the photograph is understood as a naive object or the work of an experienced

artificer, its meaning—and the viewer’s response—depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified; that is, on words” (29).³ Thus, he wishes to be in control of his own narrative.

Jesús’ reaction to having his picture taken evidences the great influence that items of memory, such as photographs, have over reality. The traces of the past which are continuously being articulated into narratives, call into question the stability of memories themselves. Meaning appears to be detached from its specific image and only re-formulated through the narratives that affectively impact the person who is in the process of remembering and who experiences a feeling of shock. The photograph, as a physical object, remains an item bound to be interpreted by the specificity of contexts. The articulation of sense/meaning is produced when we make use of those limited fragments at our disposal in order to mentally reconstruct an event. Those fragments and remnants are recognized as documents of the event itself after one is able to reconstruct the tragic event by legitimizing and associating the broken pieces that were left behind in the aftermath of destruction and violence. Let us not forget, not even for one second, the power of an image. A single fragment is capable of breaking down entire memories and even trigger new ones. In fact, it is a single newspaper clipping which will destroy Paula’s relationship with Jesús and trigger the climax of the film.

In one of the last scenes, Paula finds herself alone in Jesús’ bedroom. He had taken her there after she was robbed and hurt quite badly. After helping her clean her wounds, he lets her rest and leaves. Paula wakes up later in the night to the sound of music and dancing coming from the street. Since Jesús is out, she takes a tour around the small bedroom and curiously inspects Jesús’ things. The room had been previously ravaged and disorganized by some

3. During the scene in which Paula gives her statement at the police station, she is handed a photo album containing hundreds of pictures of suspected criminals. When she voices her inability of recognizing among all the faces the person who shot her dad, the police officers pressure her on picking a face. After she again refuses to do so, they intensely ask her to just choose one, “the one resembles the most.” This scene evidences the need of the police to attach a face (any face, not even the correct one) to the narrative of Paula’s murder. It also highlights the power of narrations when connected to photographic element that needs not be proper evidence.

unidentified people who were looking to hurt him. Paula finds the photos she took of him, along with a photo of Jesús' brother, which she gently sticks to the frame of a small hanging mirror. She continues to clean up and organize his personal items until she discovers a newspaper clipping with her father's picture and a headline that reads: CONFERENCE. After 15 seconds of silence, Paula destroys the room in anger. She throws all belongings to the ground and tramples over the mirror and the photo. Clearly, Paula is deeply affected by the newspaper clipping that remarked the day of her father's death. The emotional trigger for Paula emerges here as a private meaning for her, which suddenly surfaces and impacts her process of remembering and what Jesús means to her. The intense emotional response that the photos and the newspaper clipping cause on Paula could be described using Barthes' concept of the *punctum*, which,

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[...] (a Latin word derived from the Greek word for trauma) [...] inspires an intensely private meaning, one that is suddenly, unexpectedly recognized and consequently remembered (it "shoots out of [the photograph] like an arrow and pierces me"); it 'escapes' language (like Lacan's real); it is not easily communicable through/with language. The punctum is 'historical' as an experience of the irrefutable indexicality of the photograph (its contingency upon a referent). The punctum is a detail or "partial object" that attracts and holds the viewer's (the Spectator's) gaze; it pricks or wounds the observer." (1980: 33)

Being a fundamentally narrative, yet unintelligible, element, the *punctum* allows us to better understand and highlight the narrative mechanisms of memory. In effect, an element that is part of the event or emerges from it, cannot avoid being part of its history. However, as we have seen, it is also a purely subjective fiction inasmuch as it escapes form and meaning. Paula's reaction to her father's newspaper photo elucidates much more than her personal reaction to the memory of trauma. It emphasizes the role of her own process of remembering and materializes a dangerous realization. Paula is not simply a bystander of the fiction; she is its creator and main protagonist. The intensely private meaning that Paula experiences is nothing else than a subjective semiotic dynamic.

All photographs in this scene now convey different narratives, fluctuating between different stories. The meaning of the past

is determined by how it is felt and experienced in the present and is, in consequence, the affective nostalgia for the past that which motivates us to reformulate it. The inclusion of the pictures as an important element in the plot, with the capacity to affect and influence actions, points to the importance of the tools of memory in setting in motion the flows of affect. The ruins, those remains and traces, are unstable, variable, and evidence the constant struggle over memory. Their meaning depends on the affective dynamics that negotiate their space and reform them in accordance to the needs of the present.⁴ Affectivity and emotion have replaced reason as the judge of cultural significance (Reber 2012: 94). The affective map that is composed by those intense, violent “pictures we all carry around with us, on which are recorded the affective values of the various sites and situations that constitute our social worlds,” (Flatley 2008, 78) becomes a way not only through which viewers relate to the narratives, but also as a way of participating in the processes of memory and of being in the world.

Violence is impossible to represent as there is no intelligible original event to narrate: it breaks the storytelling capacity, it creates gaps in memory. “Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was,’ it means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger,” it means bringing memory into the present to re-read it, re-consider it, re-signify it (Benjamin 2010: 391). It is the impossibility of making sense of the past event, of incorporating it narratively which indicates the presence of the traumatic event. Thus, forgetting is not absence or emptiness, instead, it is the presence of that absence, the representation of something that was and is no longer, erased, silenced, or denied. These are the situations where repression and dissociation act as psychic mechanisms that cause interruptions, breaks, and traumatic gaps in the narrative. Indeed, traumatic repetitions and dramatizations are “tragically lonely,” while narrative memories are social constructions communicable to others (Bal 1999). The narratives of violence articulate the frag-

4. Sánchez Prado (2012) argues that this affectivity is constituted in response to the collapse of traditional discourses of Western modernity, which has created epistemic spaces for emotions in the Latin American public space.

mented space of the ruins and the *remainings* as the foundation of memory in the process of constructing an affective map in which reason breaks down as the conceptual framework of memory and identity. Photography, with its magical capacity of creating “the illusion of consensus” (Sontag 2003: 6) and of collectively re-creating transparent images of what is real (about who we are), reminds us about something we already forgot: the innate fiction that structures our notions of reality. Memory’s processes, then, stand by the collective articulations of meaning through the reassembling and repurposing of those fictions that remain forever ruined, fragmented, waiting to pierce, and to wound.

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