

Introduction

Escobar was a serious bandido. A bandido's bandido.
[Escobar era un bandido serio. Un bandido muy bandido.]

Germán Caycedo Castro, *Operación Pablo Escobar*, 75

He became a legend who controlled everything from the shadows. . . . At the height of his splendor, people put up altars with his picture and lit candles to him in the slums of Medellín. It was believed he could perform miracles. No Colombian in history ever possessed or exercised a talent like his for shaping public opinion. And none had a greater power to corrupt.

Gabriel García Márquez, *News of a Kidnapping*, 181

In June 2009, a photograph featuring a slain hippopotamus surrounded by a team of gloating hunters circulated in the Colombian press, stirring discontent and generating debates on animal rights and beyond. This indignation was triggered by the fate of the exotic beast, whose only transgression was to be out of place, a species foreign to yet thriving in Colombia. The hippo had committed the fatal error of leaving the relative safety of Hacienda Nápoles, his birthplace, following a clash with the herd's dominant male. Outrage was not the only emotion awakened by the event; nor was Pepe, the slain creature, just an ordinary hippo. The animal was part of an ostentatious project of Pablo Escobar, who in his heyday circumvented international regulations restricting the commerce of exotic animals to populate his ranch, Noah-like, with flora and fauna from the four corners of the globe.

Many creatures from Escobar's menagerie of zebras, giraffes, kangaroos, and rhinoceroses would not survive; the luckier few were transferred

to zoos, but after the drug baron's death, the four original hippopotamuses remained at Hacienda Nápoles, where they flourished in the river Magdalena and the estate's artificial lakes. They also multiplied, setting off concerns about public safety at the national level, fears somewhat mitigated by the animals' attachment to the enormous estate and a lack of proof of their belligerence. By then Hacienda Nápoles, converted to a bizarre theme park, was attracting more than fifty thousand visitors a year. Yet unluckily for Pepe, once he and his mate, Matilda, moved away from their now touristy home and had offspring, thereby feeding fears of ecological imbalance and an infestation of Colombian waters with dangerous African behemoths, his fate played out with strange parallelisms to that of his notorious former master, grabbing the nation's attention and illustrating how engrained Pablo Escobar has remained in Colombia's consciousness years after his demise.¹

When the kingpin of the Medellín Cartel died in a 1993 raid, Colombians sighed with relief. The last decade of his life was marked by bombings, kidnappings, and executions that brought the country almost to a standstill, causing the Colombian government, rival *narcotraficantes*, and the U.S. antidrug forces to unite in an effort to bring down the larger-than-life criminal. In the end, exploiting Escobar's attachment to his family, they traced the phone signal while he was talking with his son and found him almost unprotected in one of his multiple safe houses, in the middle-class neighborhood of Los Olivos, Medellín. He was gunned down in an operation immortalized by a series of unsettling photographs taken by a DEA agent, reminiscent of a hunting party, where the grinning executioners waved their guns in the background. Center stage is given to Escobar's bloated and undignified cadaver, with blood spilling onto the roof tiles, his paunchy stomach sticking out from a too-small shirt. In this photograph, Escobar, like the hippo, was a wild beast taken down by a team of jubilant huntsmen, who probably sensed that it would be the most important photograph of their lives.²

After all, by 1993, Escobar was already a legend. Dead or alive, he would reign in Colombia's dark folklore as an infamous antihero and international success story, recognized at one point by *Forbes* magazine as one of the ten richest men in the world. Escobar was the bandit of bandits in Germán Caycedo's assessment, and for Gabriel García Márquez, he was a magician or saint who could sway public opinion like no one before. The endless testimonies on his life, his ruthless cunning, and the audacity with

which he defied the state while trumpeting his respect for religion and tradition make it hard to tell the story of Colombian drug trafficking, or the nation's history in general, without constantly referencing Escobar. What his killers could not imagine was that Escobar's legacy would change Colombian cultural production in print and on the screen for years to come, prompting the creation of a multimedial *narcocultura* and replicating the narco lifestyle in television, literature, music, architecture, language, fashion, the female beauty ideal, and social rituals, including those associated with death. *Narcocultura* came to represent a new way of life in the media-saturated world, a complex, hybrid social identity that embedded itself firmly through a slew of flamboyant characters.³ Replete with drug lords, small-scale *traquetos* (*narcotraficantes* who move cocaine in tens of kilos rather than tons), *sicarios* (young assassins for hire), cocaine mules (individual transporters), *prepagos* (high-end prostitutes), and silicone-enhanced trophy women, it would become a defining feature of the nation's media landscape. Its discharges of violence, obsession with capital accumulation, and parvenu gaudiness—a mixture of Hollywood kitsch, Miami ostentation, Tex-Mex bravado, and local tastes—captured global audiences, tapping into present-day preoccupations with mass commodities, excess, and instant gratification.

Likewise, Escobar himself, albeit in every version imaginable, would sashay into the culture industry either to serve as a contextual backdrop or to occupy the center stage. His notoriety, adroit business acumen, rags-to-riches narrative, lawlessness, and terrorism against the Colombian state are an intriguing story that invited multiple interpretations and reproductions, leading to his instant recognition as an icon of bravado and evil. “Pablo Escobar-ness,” as Colombia's prominent weekly *Semana* phrased it, has proven to be a particularly controversial subject to grapple with, divisive and still difficult to assess because “nobody agrees about the true breadth of his legacy—nor about the impact of his image—now mythicized because of a death that is increasingly distant and blurry” (“Pablo Escobar Refuses”). The Medellín capo has endured in the thug culture of ostentation, the exaggerated kitsch of narco fashion, the language of the *comunas*,⁴ and in tales of antiheroes and good versus evil. Nowadays, narco stories in print and screen, fictitious or based on facts, unveil volatile worlds of drug lords who, through wealth and violence, get the flashiest women and properties only to lose them rapidly to another, even more brutal opponent.

The narco trend has spawned a wide variety of material for disparate tastes. While the bulk of these products underpin capitalist ideology, some also lay claim to a socially beneficial message, and others promise to reveal the long-hidden truth about the past by disclosing sensational information that would understandably elicit curiosity. As Alfredo Serrano, the man behind the 2012 documentary series *Las víctimas de Pablo Escobar*, assures, Escobar has never really died, for the tentacles of his corruption remain embedded in Congress, in the nation's justice system, and in how various presidencies were formed and sustained (Ángel). Serrano's production aims to undermine Escobar's social bandit reputation, by disclosing the suffering the capo inflicted on the nation as a whole. It goes to the core of the devastation caused by Escobar by foregrounding the reactions of husbands, wives, parents, and children of Escobar's countless victims, people who choke up in front of the camera, as if the tragedy that ravaged their lives two decades ago had just taken place.⁵ Similarly, the 2016 RCN Televisión series *Bloque de Búsqueda* tells the story of General Hugo Martínez Poveda in the fictionalized character Colonel Hernán Martín (played by Rafael Novoa) and of Colonel Hugo Aguilar as Captain Antonio Gavilán (played by Sebastián Martínez), the men who headed the elite police corps charged with tracking down and killing the capo. Here, Escobar is but a shadowy figure looming over good citizens who want to free Colombia from narco corruption. The center stage is given at all times to the upstanding warriors for justice and to their innocent families who are ever threatened and subjected to Escobar's fury.⁶ An online project titled *Narcotour* was created in 2017 by Mauricio Builes, former press director of the Colombian Center for Historical Memory, and his journalism students. The idea of a virtual exploration of Escobar's banditry through the eyes of his many victims came to life as a reaction to the growing popularity of the capo among tourists who flock to Medellín and Colombia in search of sensationalism. Understandably, the pain caused by Escobar persists. At the same time, the Colombian book market has witnessed an upsurge of narco-themed memoirs written by Escobar's family members and crime associates, by his celebrity lover who opens up about their affair, by other drug traffickers who offer from prison their versions of the Cali and the North Valley Cartels, by members of the police force who dealt with the criminals firsthand, or by a go-between, Madame Rochy, who claims to have procured the most desirable Colombian women for her wealthy criminal clients.