


The Narconovela and Crime in Colombia: 40 Years after *La Mala Hierba*

Carolina Galindo

School of Human Sciences of the Universidad del Rosario, Colombia
carolina.galindo@urosario.edu.co

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Abstract. This article analyses the origins of the narconovela (narco-soap opera) in Colombia, focusing on the controversy caused, at the start of the 1980's, by the soap opera entitled *La mala hierba* (*The Evil Weed*). Through an analysis of its reception during the time it was on the air, some links with the current discussion about this genre will be established, along with some links with its impact on the legitimization of narcotics trafficking and crime in Colombia and Latin America in recent years.

Key Words: narconovela (narco-soap opera), drug trafficking in Colombia, crime, Latin America

Narconovela in kriminal v Kolumbiji: 40 let po telenoveli *La mala hierba*

Povzetek. Članek obravnava izvor žanra narkonovele (narkotelenovele) v Kolumbiji, pri čemer se osredotoča na polemike, ki jih je v začetku osemdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja sprožila telenovela z naslovom *La mala hierba* (Zla trava). Z analizo recepcije te telenovele v času njenega predvajanja vzpostavljamo povezave z aktualno razpravo o tem žanru in preučujemo njen vpliv na legitimizacijo trgovine z mamili in kriminala v Kolumbiji ter Latinski Ameriki v zadnjih letih.

Ključne besede: narkonovela (narkotelenovela), trgovina z mamili v Kolumbiji, kriminal, Latinska Amerika

According to the Global Report on Cocaine (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2023), Colombia not only continues to be the biggest producer of cocaine in the world, but it also broke a new record for the amount of land devoted to growing coca in 2022, reaching 220,000 hectares, a 13% increase compared with the previous year. After more than five decades when the then president of the United States, Richard Nixon,

declared the War on Drugs, its failure has not only become evident (Vuliamy 2011), but one also notices a certain legitimacy given to drug trafficking, which is reflected in different expressions in what T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer would call the 'cultural industry,' especially in a genre which has become very popular in recent years – the *narcotelenovela* (the narco-television soap opera), usually known as a *narconovela*.

Although most of the studies on the *narconovela* have focused on the series produced in countries like Mexico and Colombia during the past twenty-five years, the origins of this genre date back to 1983, when a soap opera named *La mala hierba* (*The Evil Weed*) (Bossio 1982¹) was shown on TV; it was based on a 1981 novel of the same name by the Colombian writer Juan Gossain and caused a big public controversy at the time. Thus, the purpose of this article will be to examine the debate caused by the airing of this telenovela, as well as the impact of the subsequent growth of drug trafficking in Latin America on the consolidation and expansion of the *narconovela* genre as a means to legitimize criminal activities in the region, especially narcotics trafficking.²

To meet that aim, this text is divided into three parts: the first discusses a series of conceptual approaches to the term 'narconovela'; the second explains the methodology of this investigation, which presents a synthesis of the soap opera *La mala hierba* and analyses the main public controversies it caused in Colombia; finally, the third part discusses how *narconovelas* are a means of legitimizing criminal activity, especially drug trafficking.

A Conceptual Approach to the Narconovela

In the words of the GUMELAB project, the concept of the *narcotelenovela*, usually known as the *narconovela*, may be described as a subcategory of Latin American telenovelas dealing with drug trafficking and the fight against it in Latin America. Narratively, paired with fictional and cinematic elements, the serial format narrates the wars between drug cartels, or drug trafficking and its relationship to local politics. Mostly, it is about the trafficking of cocaine. In the foreground of a *narconovela* are the drug

¹ Editor's note: In references to television series in the text and in the list of references, a year of their premiere is listed.

² I would like to thank Mónica Contreras and my colleagues on the 'History Transfer through Entertainment Media in Latin America' project (Laboratory for Memory and Digital Media Research – GUMELAB – of the Free University of Berlin) for all their support in the investigation leading to this article. And likewise thank Daniela Soacha, of the Universidad del Rosario, for her meticulous work as my research assistant.

lords and their drug cartels. The viewer sees the events from the perspective of drug traffickers and can identify with them as well as feel sympathy for them. Supporters of other drug cartels, the family, the police, or paramilitaries play secondary roles (GUMELAB, n.d.).

Before giving a more precise explanation of other characteristics of this particular genre, it is important to remember that, in general, soap operas (especially Latin American ones) have borrowed their main characteristics from the melodrama (which was introduced in Germany in the eighteenth century), the main subject of which is the universality of love and sentiments (Gaona 2022). In line with the view of José Luis Cabrujas, the melodrama has some key features, like the presence of polarized characters who are clearly defined as good and bad; the expression of powerful and unalterable feelings, where love is strong and prevails over everything; the victory of good over evil where truths are revealed and the guilty are punished; along with a descriptive portrait of the people of the place and the simple man, in particular, along with allegorical scenes which dramatize human experience and the simple life (Gaona 2022, 29). The last aspect thus situates the soap opera as part of that broader universe known as ‘popular culture,’ which, according to Peter Burke, is located beyond the frontiers of elite groups, or rather, is characteristic of the subordinate classes (González Díaz 2018, 68).

The particular form of the narconovelas ‘can be classified as an action series, with scenes that show violence, murder, sex, excess, intrigue, and drugs. Common themes of the narconovela also include impunity from prosecution and corruption, as well as the weak power of the State and society’s distrust of institutions and politics. Narconovelas show a reality of Latin America that often results from the failure of political institutions: the intervention of criminal organizations’ (GUMELAB, n.d.).³. Like soap operas, the narconovelas are part of a special universe which authors like Omar Rincón and other experts in Latin America have described as the ‘narco culture’ (see, e.g., Rincón 2013; Abad Faciolince 2008; Álvarez Gardeazabal 1995; Correa Ortiz 2022; Becerra Romero 2018; Sandoval Piñeros 2020; Pardo León 2018). Although it is not possible to provide an extensive discussion of this term here for reasons of space, it is important to note that the use of the word ‘narcoculture’ began to be important in academic studies when the Colombian writer and politician

³ Editor’s note: All quotations originally published in languages other than English have been translated by the authors.

Gustavo Álvarez Gardezabal defined a ‘culture of narcotics trafficking’ as a revolutionary change in Colombian society, a kind of ‘revolution in reverse,’ characterized by a concentration of land ownership in a few hands (instead of being distributed among many), the exponential growth of illegal economies and levels of violence and (most importantly), a radical change of values: the replacement of the morality of sin (characteristic of Catholicism) by a morality of money (Álvarez Gardezabal 1995, xvi), which can buy everything (or nearly everything), even the full and open inclusion and acceptance of the drug trafficker in the circles of the traditional elites.⁴

This change in the ethical dimension also led to a series of changes in aesthetics and tastes in those sectors of society which, through drug trafficking (or activities linked to it), managed to enter the world of consumption. These transformations are expressed in what Héctor Abad Faciolince describes as forms of ‘gigantism’ (2008, 514) – an ostentatious display of wealth by the purchase of properties, automobiles, and expensive clothes; the devouring of large portions of food, and the imitation of foreign styles, especially architectural ones. The ‘taste of the mafioso’ thus emerges as a caricature or exaggeration of the taste of the bourgeois, a hyperbolic form represented by what Omar Rincón (2013, 7) calls ‘the theme park of opulence and bourgeois ostentation; they join all which gives him the status of the privileged class (art, objects from exotic cultures, leading-edge technologies, expensive liquors with a well-known cachet) with the characteristic customs of his class (a circle of trusted friends, womanizing, land ownership and worship of the mother), all meant to show how well he has done in life, to prove his success.’

The cultural industries were not indifferent to this trend. Although space does not permit a detailed account of such cultural expressions of the narcotics-trafficking phenomenon, such as music, literature, film, etc.,

⁴ An example of this is the case of Jaime Builes, a well-known drug trafficker, who returned to the town where he was born as a newly rich man who was accepted by the families of the traditional elite for whom he worked as a peon when he was young. He bought the town’s social clubs, ice cream parlours, farms and other places where people gathered. According to the account by the journalist Germán Castro Caycedo, ‘it wasn’t long before both the rich and the poor accepted the inclusion of Builes and his rise to the highest social position in Fredonia [...] “he was no longer Jaime but Don Jaime” [...]. His marriage to the daughter of a member of the “local aristocracy” finally put the seal on his membership in the elite and would be the ideal occasion to celebrate his turning into the boss of the town’ (Duncan 2011, 167–8).

it is important to single out the emergence of new aesthetic forms found in the genres of the *narcocorrido*,⁵ the *sicaresca*⁶ and a wide variety of films which glorify the law's fight against drug traffickers or, instead, vindicate (in their own way) the lifestyle of those who are engaged in that business.⁷ Along the same lines, the narconovelas emerged a few years later and wound up consolidating themselves as one of the most popular cultural products in the field of narco-culture.

⁵ The *narcocorridos*, better known in Colombia as *corridos prohibidos*, is a musical genre whose roots lie in the traditional Mexican *corrido*. Catherine Heau defines it as 'the group of songs regarded as originating in the local or regional oral tradition or produced by well-known singers and song writers on a local or regional level, as opposed to songs from other countries' (Lira-Hernández 2013, 31). The Mexican *corridos* narrate different historical and local events, and there is no doubt that they reached their highest point during the Mexican Revolution, which, in turn, was depicted in the 'golden era' of Mexican cinema. Several decades after the end of that era, the *corridos* no longer told epic stories about the revolutionary period, but, rather, the experiences of members of organized crime and not only in Mexico but in Colombia as well, precisely in regions where Mexican culture is strongly rooted in its popular culture. In the words of Julián Alveiro Almonacid Buitrago (2016, 58–73), the *narcocorridos* 'portray narcotics trafficking in terms of its beliefs, tastes, territories [...]. They also speak of those who have been marginalized by the state, geo-political processes and the actors in the internal conflict.'

⁶ *Sicaresca* is a play on words from 'picaresque' and 'sicario', the Colombian term for a hired killer, especially in the context of narcotics trafficking. It was coined by the Colombian writer Héctor Abad Faciolince and refers to a particular kind of literary genre whose protagonists were initially narcotics traffickers or hitmen employed by the drug cartels. Years later, *sicaresca* was used by journalists to report on the lives of the leaders of the paramilitaries and other criminals. In the opinion of Abad Faciolince (2008, 518), the commercial success of this kind of literature is due to a 'kind of fascination with evil [...] with the cult of the doubtful heroism of murderers' in Colombian society.

⁷ Finally, it is worth pointing out that in the early 1990s, at one of the worst moments in the battle between the big drug cartels and the Colombian state, the production of various Colombian films depicting a fictionalized version of narcotics trafficking began: they were told from the standpoint of some of its actors, particularly the 'lords of drugs.' There were a growing number of these kinds of productions at the start of the twenty-first century. In this ample filmography, it is worth singling out some, like *Amar y vivir* (Barreto 1990), *Rodrigo D: No futuro* (Gaviria 1990), *La virgen de los sicarios* (Schroder 2000), *María llena eres de gracia* (Marston 2004), *Sumas y restas* (Gaviria 2004), *El Rey* (Dorado 2004), *El trato* (Norden 2005), *Rosario Tijeras* (Maillé 2005), *Apocalipsur* (Mejía 2005), *El Colombian dream* (Aljure 2005), *Paraíso Travel* (Brand 2008), *Perro come perro* (Moreno 2009), *El arriero* (Calle 2009), *El cielo* (Basile 2009), *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (Bolívar Moreno 2010b), *El cartel de los sapos* (Ferrand and López 2008), *Jardín de amapolas* (Melo Guevara 2012), *Estrella del sur* (González Rodríguez 2013), *Manos sucias* (Kubota Wladyka 2014), *Pájaros de verano* (Guerra and Gallego 2018), *Pescador* (Glusman 2018), and *Lavaperros* (Moreno 2020).

Before giving a detailed account of what we believe was the pioneer of the narconovelas, as is the case of *La mala hierba*, it is worth going back to the initial trajectory of this genre in Colombia, before it spread to and became popular in other Latin American countries, especially Mexico, and also the Hispanic community in the United States.

Following the strong impact on the viewing public of the first soap opera, which openly dealt with the subject of drug trafficking in Colombia, namely, *La mala hierba* (1983),⁸ there was a lapse of several years before Colombian television produced other ones. The high levels of violence in the cities unleashed by the war between the big drug cartels and the Colombian state, along with the dynamics of the armed conflict in the rural zones, had created a kind of tacit censorship of any dramatization of such violent occurrences and one of its bloodiest facets, the economy of drug trafficking. Thus, it was not until the 1990s that productions which dealt with such themes, either in an open or tangential manner, began to flourish, such as the country's internal war (see Galindo 2025), hired killers,⁹ drug trafficking and its links with some sectors of the Colombian state, and the special characteristics of the illegal or semi-legal economies.

About the latter, it is worth singling out the case of the *Fuego Verde* (*Green Fire*) series (1996), produced by RTI television and written by the US journalist Thomas Quinn and US filmmaker Benjamin Odell. It centred on daily life in the emerald mines in the Department of Boyacá, a region marked by violence and power struggles among the grand *señores* (bosses) there. While the high ratings of the series showed that it had a wide acceptance by the Colombian public, it caused a big controversy among the inhabitants of the emerald zone, who thought that it stigmatized them as violent persons and typical representatives of a system of illegal economies. These kinds of criticisms are still being levelled against such productions, but, paradoxically, the number of Colombian television series and soap operas about illegal economies has grown over the years and they have even become an export product.

Two general trends are found in television series and soap operas about drug trafficking. In line with the interpretation of Mónica Contreras Saiz and Hannah Müssemann (2023, 20), we might say that a first group of such programmes 'deal with different aspects of the history of drug traf-

⁸ We will discuss this impact in detail in the following section.

⁹ This is the case of the popular 1991 series *Cuando quiero llorar no lloro*, also known as *Los Victorinos*, where one of its protagonists becomes a hired killer (Santofimio 1991).

ficking in Colombia, exploring their connections with the political history of the country and the Colombian armed conflict [...] they employ some strategies to give an authentic portrayal of reality.¹⁰ In this first set of soap operas,¹¹ there is a lesson to be learnt, a certain 'moralist function: he who gets involved in narcotics trafficking winds up dead or in prison' (22). Their instructive nature becomes more apparent when the story is told from the standpoint of members of the police force or the judiciary, or victims. However, since these productions are aimed at a broad public, this type of moral guidance is inevitably given another interpretation or has a different reception by some of the spectators. That is true of series like *El cartel de los sapos* (*The Snitch Cartel*), seasons 1 and 2 (Camilo Ferrand and López 2008); *El cartel de los sapos: el origen* (*The Snitch Cartel: Origins*) (Aguilar 2021); and especially, the production that was most acclaimed on an international level, but was also the most controversial, namely, *Escobar: el patrón del mal* (*Pablo Escobar, The Drug Lord*) (Uribe, Cano, and Klement 2012). Generally known as *el patrón del mal*, the series was meant to pay homage to the victims of the head of the Medellín Cartel. In fact, two of its producers are relatives of Escobar's victims and they had a clear intention to demystify the heroic character attributed to Escobar in some social circles in Colombia and other countries (El Espectador 2012). Paradoxically, both certain sectors of public opinion and its own audience¹² have criticized the series for having a boomerang effect, that is, it has exalted the figure of Escobar or granted a tacit approval to his conduct or that of his partners and henchmen (Duzán 2023).

¹⁰ In that respect, the authors have spotted four strategies of authentication: (1) the use of books of investigative journalism, testimonies, or historical novels, (2) the use of the names of real persons or very similar ones, which helps the audience to relate to the events in the story, (3) a casting procedure which finds actors and actresses who resemble the characters they portray as closely as possible, (4) the use of archival material, and (5) filming in the places where the events occurred (Contreras Saiz and Müssermann, 2023, 130).

¹¹ In this group of soap operas and series, we find such productions as: *El fiscal* (Londoño, Perez Florez, and Suárez 1999), *Pandillas, guerra y paz* (Bolívar Moreno 2000), *La viuda de la mafia* (Peña and Barreto 2004), *Correo de inocentes* (Londoño and Noguera 2011), *La Mariposa* (González and Ramírez 2012), *En la boca del lobo* (Rempel 2016), *Bloque de búsqueda* (Hiller 2016), *El general Naranjo* (Hoyos 2016), *Noticia de un secuestro* (Jorquera Arriagada and Wood 2022), and *Goles en contra* (Gonzalez and Prince 2022).

¹² The GUMELAB project has made an interesting effort for analyzing the debates about *El patrón del mal* and other series which appear in the ambit of social networks (see Müssermann et al. 2024).

The second group of productions, which began in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, is represented by the narconovelas, properly speaking, those which are mainly told from the standpoint of the narcotics trafficker or his collaborators or people who are close to him. A more detailed analysis of these kinds of productions will be presented in the third section. For now, it is sufficient to point out that reviewing the origins of the narconovela can provide us with important leads for understanding why these productions have turned into a mechanism for legitimizing criminal activities in Colombia and Latin America. For that reason, we need to pause here and discuss the phenomenon produced in Colombia in the first half of the 1980s by *La mala hierba*.

The Marijuana Boom in Fiction: *La mala hierba*

In Colombia, 1982 was a year of transition in the history of drug trafficking. A controversial member of the Colombian Congress, Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria, had been elected deputy to Congressman Jairo Ortega. At the end of the year Escobar travelled to Spain as a member of the Colombian Congress, officially invited to the inauguration of the new socialist president of that country, Felipe González, and at the start of 1983, after being granted a visa to the United States, he and his family visited that country (where a photo of him was taken in front of the White House). Luck seemed to be smiling on him. In the words of James D. Henderson (2015, 52), Escobar ‘had power and prestige. Already one of the country’s wealthiest men, his fortune swelled with each passing week. [...] His real estate and business interests in Miami were extensive. At that instant there seemed to be little threatening the future of Escobar and Colombia’s other cocaine magnates.’

A few months after the congressman and his deputy, Escobar, were elected, a new soap opera began to become popular with the Colombian public. The first chapter of *La mala hierba* was aired on June 7, 1982. It was based on the novel of the same name by the journalist Juan Gossain, which had been published by the Plaza & Janés firm barely a year before and became a bestseller. Although Gossain’s book has been classified as fiction, it is based on his research as a journalist into the phenomenon of the *bonanza marimbera* (marijuana boom) in the Colombian Caribbean region in the 1970s. And although this boom had already ended by the time his novel was published (1981), its effects on important sectors of Colombian society were evident. According to its author, his intention was to use this narrative to denounce the change in the system of values

caused by the first major drug trafficking economy in that South American country.

Before giving a detailed explanation of the story told in the soap opera, it is necessary to present the methodology used in this investigation, which is based on an exhaustive review of press articles at the time the programme was aired (1982–1983),¹³ an interpretation of the novel (Gos-saín 2019) and the vision of the soap opera.¹⁴ In addition, secondary sources were consulted, especially those on the phenomenon of the marijuana boom¹⁵ and some cultural productions derived from it. However, it is necessary to clarify that this analysis focuses on the controversies caused by the soap opera rather than a detailed study of its content.

In contrast with the trafficking of cocaine, the phenomenon of the *bonanza marimbera* has not been widely studied by Colombian and foreign academics. While it is necessary to acknowledge that there have been some rigorous studies of the subject by historians, such as Darío Betancourt Echeverry, a victim of forced disappearance by paramilitary groups in the 1990s (see, e.g., Betancourt and Luz García 1994), James D. Henderson (2012; 2015), Eduardo Sáenz Rovner (2021), and, recently, Lina Britto (2020; 2022), there are many unanswered questions about this chapter of

¹³ A total of 54 press articles were examined, from the newspapers *El Tiempo* (6) and *El Espectador* (14) and the magazines *Semana* (1), *Cromos* (1), *Magazín Dominical* (1), *Carrusel* (2), *Elenco* (11) and *TeleRevista* (18).

¹⁴ All the chapters of the soap opera produced by Caracol Television (120) have been retrieved and are available on the Caracol Play payment platform.

¹⁵ The *bonanza marimbera* (marijuana boom) refers to the period in Colombian history between 1972 and 1978 when the production and smuggling of marijuana flourished to the point where it became an import-export sector. The term *bonanza* has been used in macroeconomic analyses of Latin America to explain the expansion of the exploitation and export of a particular kind of commodity goods (agricultural, mining or energy) and the consequent effects. Although cannabis has been grown in Colombia since colonial times, when hemp was brought from South Asia for the manufacture of rope, it was not until the 1970s that a new variety known as ‘Santa Marta Gold’ was developed, thanks to technological advances driven by the strong demand in the US market. It was very successful among consumers and turned Colombian marijuana into an export product. Due to limitations of space, we cannot mention all the changes which the boom led to in the societies of the local producers, but the statistics speak for themselves: at the high point of the boom, 20,000 to 30,000 farmers grew cannabis on 50,000 to 70,000 hectares, which amounted to annual exports of up to 20,000 metric tonnes (see Henderson 2015, 30). At the start of the 1980’s, marijuana was replaced by another recreational drug which became the favorite of US consumers: cocaine, the start of a new boom in the Colombian economy.

Colombian history, especially the daily lives and histories of the families and persons who were part of this economic fever. For this reason, first journalistic accounts and then fiction were the most important mechanisms to fill this gap in knowledge about a crucial period in Colombian history. There is no doubt that the majority of the public gets its first information about historical events from literature, especially the entertainment media such as film and television.¹⁶ In this respect, journalistic productions like *La noche de las luciérnagas* (Cervantes Angulo 1981), literary ones like *Leopardo al sol* (Restrepo 1993),¹⁷ musical,¹⁸ and audiovisual ones (like *Pájaros de verano*¹⁹), and the subject of our study, *La mala hierba*, have been the immediate point of reference for knowledge of the marijuana boom in Colombia and other countries.

The setting of the soap opera *La mala hierba* is a fictional place (La Antillana) in an equally fictional country (La República del Caribe). The story follows the Miranda family over three generations, centered around the parents of Cacique Miranda (here, 'Cacique' is a title meaning 'Chief,' not a personal name), Cacique Miranda himself (the protagonist), his wife Genoveva, and their only child, Roberto de los Ángeles.

The story of the Miranda family is the pretext for narrating the trajectory of the lives of those who entered into the marijuana business in the Caribbean region of Colombia, attained the glory and power which 'easy money' yields, used violence and corruption as the quickest and most effective means to fulfil their aims and were finally destroyed by the same violence.

¹⁶ It is worth singling out here the work of the US historian Robert A. Rosenstone (1995), who has championed the use of films as a method for teaching history. For its part, the GUMELAB project uses the term 'soap operas of memory' (coined by Mónica Contreras) to mean 'those which narrate different historical events, that is, verifiable ones, which are set in the context of a fictitious and melodramatic script and are recognizable by their viewers or their parents or grandparents. They are called soap operas of historical memory not only because they are a record of the social and political events which they depict, but also because they evoke the personal memories of their viewers' (see Contreras Saiz 2019).

¹⁷ In 2010, the US television channel Telemundo (aimed at the Hispanic public) transmitted the soap opera *Ojo por ojo* (Bolívar Moreno 2010a) based on this novel.

¹⁸ In addition to some productions in the genre of the *corridos prohibidos*, the *vallenato*, another genre of popular music, has dealt with the power of the trafficking of marijuana in the Caribbean region of Colombia during the boom (see Bonivento van Gricken 2022).

¹⁹ *Birds of Passage* (2018) is a film, directed by Ciro Guerra and Cristina Gallego, which tells the story of some families from the Wayuu indigenous community who become involved in the marijuana trade.

The first chapter sets the course of the story with the murder of Cacique Miranda's father by members of the Morales family. As a result, Cacique's mother makes her son swear that he will avenge his father. At the beginning of the story, Cacique and his family live in poverty, within an economy centered on the smuggling of goods, particularly between Colombia and Venezuela. Thanks to his job as an assistant on his cousin's bus, Cacique frequently travels to different parts of the Caribbean region and forms part of the circle of smugglers, selling goods like whisky and cigarettes to support his family. This was not unknown in the family, as his father had also been a smuggler, albeit a small fry. As the years go by, Miranda meets two major smugglers in the zone: an old acquaintance of his father known as Palestino (who belongs to the Syrian community of La Antillana) and the Old Jew (a descendant of Polish Jews who emigrated to the Republic of the Caribbean). The two are part of a gang that steals and sells large amounts of merchandise from Panama. Miranda's involvement in this criminal network not only enables him to overcome his poverty, but also to amass a small capital that gives him social acceptance and prestige in La Antillana.

A scene in the first novel of the soap opera shows how, when he is drunk in a bar, the then young Cacique Miranda allows a gypsy woman to read his fortune in the palm of his hand. The gypsy foresees that he will become the richest and most powerful man in his region. Although Miranda's initial reaction is one of laughter and scepticism, the prophecy of the fortune teller will come true two decades later when, on a trip to Miami, the protagonist (who is already a veteran smuggler) encounters a person who will change his life and that of his family: Dick Levi. Levi is a citizen of the United States and a cousin of the Old Jew. He has had a long, tough career in the underworld. Levi began his career in crime as a poor boy from the Jewish community in New York who was forced to sell illegal lottery tickets on the street and later took part in drug trafficking, a business he learnt about during his years in prison. When he finds out what Miranda is doing, Levi proposes that he get into the transportation of marijuana, as the Republic of the Caribbean promises to be a new supplier of the drug.

Despite his qualms about the consumption of hallucinogens, Miranda not only agrees to Levi's proposal but gets into the business with such a will that he winds up as the leader of all of the links in its chain, from the planting of marijuana to its sale in the United States. The crops are grown in the White Mountain (the fictitious name of the Sierra Nevada

de Santa Marta Mountain range near the Caribbean coast of Colombia). Once harvested, they are shipped by sea and, later, transported in light planes, the most effective and safest ways to ensure that the marijuana reaches the distributors and consumers in the United States. Miranda is part of a criminal network made up of Tanus (a relative of Palestino and owner of several vessels), us pilots, corrupt policemen like Commander Mendoza, small farmers who grow the crop, bankers and whole families in La Antillana. The marijuana business leads to overnight fortunes and excesses of every kind and, of course, violence as well, which the Miranda family has never been exempt from. Even when he was poor and just starting as a smuggler, the Cacique Miranda obeyed the orders of his mother and organized the murder of the Morales brothers to avenge their killing of his father.²⁰ And since then, violence has continued to be the most effective way to undo his rivals. But it is not enough. His ambitions reach a higher level. The Cacique Miranda also longs for political power, but that job must be left to Roberto de los Ángeles.

Roberto de los Ángeles grew up with the privileges that Cacique and Genoveva had never enjoyed. He was the only child of the Miranda family, and his father pinned all his hopes on him, not hesitating to send him to study Political Science at Harvard University. Although he could not finish his course there after being briefly imprisoned in Florida (with the help of his father and Levi, he escaped from jail), he finished his education at an elite university in Bogotá, where he met his future wife, María Jimena Isaza, a member of an aristocratic family and close to the nation's circles of political power. The marriage of Roberto and María Jimena turns into an alliance that benefits both families: the Mirandas establish contacts with the Colombian government, which helps them to launder their assets, and the bride's family gets access to the capital they had lost a long time before. The Mirandas 'launder' their surname and the Isazas their finances.

It is precisely at this point, nearly at the end of the story, that we must pause and look at what people thought about *La mala hierba* at the time. As mentioned above, while the year in which the soap opera began to be

²⁰ The vendetta is part of the cultural universe of the Wayúu ethnic community, part of which lives in the region of La Guajira along the Caribbean coast of Colombia. In *La mala hierba* (Gossain 2019), La Antillana is a fictional version of La Guajira and that, added to the indigenous origin of the Miranda family, partly explains why revenge is part of the lives of its protagonists over several generations.

broadcast coincided with the election to the Colombian Congress of the most powerful cocaine trafficker in Colombian history (whose criminal activities were an open secret), many Colombians condemned *La mala hierba*. A review of the press articles at the time reveals two major trends in the criticism levelled against the soap opera by the general public, professional commentators and letters to the editor. One (which was less frequent) stressed the explicit or excessive violence of the series, while the other attacked the soap opera as a defence and glorification of crime.

The objections of the former had to do with some relatively frequent scenes in the soap opera (like those which gave a graphic description of the murder of members of the Morales family or other enemies of Cacique Miranda in plain view of the public, at a movie theatre or Mass, or shocking scenes like the murder of a man in front of his little son or young children playing with the bloody head of their father). They strongly scandalized some sectors of the viewing public and the Colombian government. Despite this condemnation of the very violent nature of the soap opera, what was most striking about many of the comments in this controversy was the accusation that the soap opera was an apology for crime. To illustrate this, it is worth quoting some opinions that have supported or attacked this argument:

It is a veritable, Machiavellian justification of crime. It exploits a situation in which the issue of marijuana buzzes in our ambit to present the argument of this 'novel.' What is going to happen when young people who are thirsty for adventure watch it on tv and see the Cacique Miranda and his friends, surrounded by beautiful women, flaunting their valuable jewellery and squandering their money? Aren't they going to emulate them? Aren't we only a step away from another marijuana boom when our kids – and even our grownups – see how easy it is to become an overnight millionaire? Isn't that the lesson of the Cacique Miranda? What is the point of all the official efforts to end this cursed trade, when the government meanwhile promotes it by allowing such an ogre to be televised?²¹

The human being always tends to imitate others and, generally speaking, the personages we see on television lend themselves to being idealized, but not always in a positive way. [...] When the *Violencia* arose in

²¹ Letter by José Osorio, from Barranquilla, published in the letters to the editor section of *El Tiempo* in August 1982.

Colombia, due to the influence of Mexican films, most of the bad guys took the names of the most famous delinquents of the revolution, like *Tiro Fijo* [sure shot], *Charronegro* [Black ghost] and Mariachi. It would be interesting to find out how many caciques Miranda already exist in Colombia.²²

In contrast with these kinds of opinions, a larger number of letters, notes and opinion columns questioned the negative comments and said that it would be impossible to deny the reality of drug trafficking when it already had deep roots in certain sectors of Colombian society and a strong impact on the country:

This novel is only being criticized because, in a succinct way, without an absurd varnishing, it depicts the problem of drug trafficking in Colombia and the resulting consequences; police commanders participating in the boom, Colombian and gringo mafiosos who lord it over a whole town, a bank manager who lends himself the money of its depositors, crimes which the Cacique Miranda bribes the authorities to cover up, spoiled daddy's or mommy's boys like Roberto de los Ángeles and the victims of it all, like Genoveva [...] [G]entlemen moralizers: all this is happening in Colombia, why hide it?²³

La mala hierba has been put in the dock [...], organizations interested in the fight against drugs have invented the story that it is encouraging narcotics trafficking, drug addiction and a load of vices. To dramatize (turn into theatre) the daily bread of Colombian society cannot be regarded as an incitement to consume or sell drugs. Instead, it is another way of showing the country what that country is living through, hears about and suffers from every day, ever since some Americans full of money and planes and anxious to 'get stoned' turned into the major promoters of the crops and a business which messed up our economic system and destroyed the little that was left of our social morality. An in-depth debate, where both the problem of drugs as such and the impact of this kind of programme on its audience are taken into account, is important and necessary.²⁴

²² Statement of the criminal lawyer Germán Navas Talero in the magazine *Elenco*, September 1982.

²³ Letter from Hugo de Jesús Caraballo, from Montería, published in the letters to the editor section of the newspaper *El Espectador*, October 1982.

²⁴ Commentary by the journalist Lucy Nieto de Samper, in her column 'Detector' in the magazine *Elenco*, September 1982.

I agree a little with the opinions about the harmful effect of *La mala hierba* but this harm is always relative since it depends on the education of the person who sees it and his understanding of things.²⁵

During this debate in the press, the Colombian government decided to censor the soap opera. The National Radio and Television Institute levied a fine of 30,000 pesos on the producer, Caracol Television, on the grounds that the series was violent and was a defence of crime. But the censorship went further. The producer was forced to change several scenes as well as the finale of the soap opera. Although the fate of Cacique Miranda remained the same in both the book and the soap opera (murdered at the hands of a descendant of the Morales family), the fate of Roberto de los Ángeles was radically changed. While in the novel, the son of the Cacique is elected the mayor of La Antillana, in the soap opera, he becomes handicapped after he is shot, and the Miranda family loses their whole fortune. The only capital which the heir holds onto is the knowledge of English he acquired in Boston and he then makes his living as a teacher and translator, while Roberto and Genoveva suffer the same loneliness and poverty. The soap opera ends with the words of Genoveva, who, in the wisdom of a Caribbean woman, says: 'the devil takes away ill-gotten gains.'

Some Final Thoughts: From *La Mala Hierba* to the Boom of the Narconovela in Latin America

In the year following the broadcast of *La mala hierba*, a public debate emerged that ultimately led to the 'political death' of Congressman Pablo Escobar. In August 1983, Senator Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, speaking in the Congress itself, accused Escobar of being one of the leading capos of cocaine trafficking in Colombia. After weeks of controversy, during which the newspaper *El Espectador* published judicial evidence supporting Lara's accusation, the Congress stripped Escobar of his parliamentary immunity. A judge then issued a warrant for his arrest. The rest is history. The same day, Escobar launched a war against the Colombian state, which began with the assassination of Lara, the judge, the director of the newspaper and all those who stood in his way (including thousands of policemen and innocent civilians). Even to this day, Colombians are still feeling the consequences of this war, as seen not only in the persistence, expansion and transformation of the phenomenon of drug trafficking,

²⁵ Opinion of the priest Marino Troncoso, published in the magazine *Elenco*, September 1982.

but also the consolidation of a narrative genre within the narco-culture, like the narconovelas, which, like cocaine, also became an export product.

As we pointed out in the first section, the broadcast of *La mala hierba* was followed by an atmosphere marked by silence and a strong censorship of the fictionalization of drug trafficking on Colombian television. This silence coincided with the war, which Escobar declared and would only begin to completely break down in the second half of the 1990s. A review of some recent events in the country's history shows us key connections between the changes the country went through in the 1990s and this new willingness to tell stories about drug trafficking on television. Escobar's death in 1993, the extradition of the heads of the Cali cartel in the following years and what was known as the 'Proceso 8000,' the investigation into President Ernesto Samper's links to drug trafficking, showed that the drug trade already had a certain degree of legitimacy, not only as an economic activity but also as a mechanism of social mobility in the country. The fact that Samper remained in the presidency showed that drug trafficking was already part of the country's political structure.

In addition to all of the above, the emergence of two major private television channels was linked to the liberalization of the economy and the adoption of new economic policies in the 1990s. These channels began to meet the demands of that part of the public that liked and were eager to see stories about drug trafficking, which was possible because the state no longer intervened in the content of such series with the same rigour as in the previous decade. These two factors, along with other expressions of the narco-culture and changes in the structure of narcotics trafficking itself (the multiplication of the cartels and the involvement of big Mexican cartels) paved the way for a new form of narconovelas, different from the pioneering ones twenty years before, ones which were narrated from the standpoint of the trafficker or his associates, or persons in his closest circle of friends. In this way, they were free to express the public's fascination with the phenomenon of drug trafficking and all its effects on Colombian and Latin American society, due to the possibilities it offered to certain sectors of society which had been excluded by the traditional elites and the social structure which accompanied the tragic start of its republican life. Among them were: *El cartel de los sapos* (Camilo Ferrand and López, 2008), *Narcos* (produced in the USA by Netflix) (Brancato, Bernard, and Miro, 2015), *Las muñecas de la mafia* (*The Mafia Dolls*) (López and Camilo Ferrand, 2009), *Sin senos no hay paraíso* (*Without Breasts There Is No Paradise*) (Bolívar Moreno, 2008), *Rosario*

Tijeras (Pelusi and Quintanilla 2016), *El Capo* (Bolívar Moreno and Gonzales 2009), *Alias el Mexicano* (*Alias the Mexican*) (Navas 2013), *La viuda negra* (*The Black Widow*) (Uribe and Bolívar Moreno 2014), and more recently USA-produced, Netflix-distributed *Griselda* (Miro et al. 2014).

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