

Despair in Colombian Films on Displacement – Shifting from Noir Western to Western Noir.

Authors:

Jerónimo Rivera-Betancur, Professor and Researcher, Universidad de La Sabana.

Jeronimo.rivera@unisabana.edu.co

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1013-0154>

Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed, Professor and Researcher, Universidad Externado de Colombia.

Enrique.uribe@uexternado.edu.co

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9415-7628>

Abstract

This article makes an analysis of three Colombian films that deal with the issue of internal forced displacement to present, through them, the possible transformation of a subgenre from the western noir to a noir western. Although some of the main themes and characteristics of the western can still be observed in the wide-shot of landscapes and the fight between the righteous, the criminal and the law, the influence of noir motifs can be spotted beyond what was described for the noir western. The inversion, with more emphasis placed on the noir aspects, leads to a possible western noir which appears as a subgenre or hybrid genre predicated upon a devastating tragedy, providing no comfort or relief to the toils experienced by the main characters, who seem to be unable to turn their fate around.

Keywords: Western; Noir; Displacement; National Cinema; Colombia

Introduction

The last 20 years have seen Colombian film production soar. Two cinema laws, one in 2003 and the other in 2012, have allowed for an increase in the production of films and of employability in this creative industry. Despite the growth in film production, viewership numbers are still down, and the increase of international production has yet to reach all the workers on this industry (Rivera-Betancur, 2019; Uribe-Jongbloed & Corredor, 2020). But the increase in films available for national consumption has heralded a new opportunity: to come to grips with our own troubled past through the narratives of the present.

Since the peace accords between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas seemed to have put an end to the longest running internal conflict in the world, Colombian films were already trying to address the troublesome memory of the past. Documentaries and feature films which relate to the history of the conflict abound, and they provide an interesting account of how Colombians are trying to cope with such a violent past. It is also a time to overcome the focus on urban stories of the Colombian films of the 1990s (Ruíz Moreno, 2006) to a more rural perspective of the “post-conflict” reality (Ortega Rincón, 2017).

Violence has had many guises in Colombia and it undoubtedly continues to be the case despite the advances brought forth by the peace process (Miller, 2020). One of the most difficult issues,

alongside massacres and political killings, is the massive displacement that the conflict generated. Great swaths of land have been affected by the conflict, and people have left their lands seeking safety and opportunities elsewhere. This forced displacement is part of the collective consciousness and, thus, part of the process that needs to be addressed by all forms of narratives, if there is to be an opportunity to heal old wounds.

This article provides an analysis of three contemporary Colombian feature films of displacement. They are framed within the western genre, specifically the *noir* western (Monticone, 2014), to discuss how they seem to tip the balance further into what could be considered another subgenre: western *noir*. The heroic remnants of the western are almost forgotten, and these stories are full of longing and despair, of a paradise lost and never recovered. But we still have the long shots, the barren wastelands, the memories of a glorious past, the gun slingers and the outlaws. Yet the story flips over to the victims and not to the heroes or the bandits. This time, the western tells the story of those who are abused and manipulated or theoretically protected by the law. The journey to the west as a site of promise remains part of the narrative, and the lawlessness of the places continues to be central to the story. But the characters have different motivations and outcomes than the cowboy champion or the saloon girl. Here people try to come to terms with a reality that is unsurmountable, a destiny that seems to render them unable to choose a better path. A road of despair.

Although Latin American cinema has been historically associated with conflicts stemming from the difficult realities of each of the countries, where topics such as drug-trafficking, petty criminality, authoritative regimes, poverty and corruption tend to be part of the plot of the stories, Colombian cinema adds to the mix one of the longest armed conflicts in the world and its manifold repercussions.

Perhaps one of the cruelest outcomes of the confrontation between the State and illegal groups has been the internally forced migration –people uprooted from their land and driven by need to the cities– a situation that has taken place for over 70 years.

Internal forced migration and displacement in Colombia

Colombia holds an infamous record in the number of internally displaced persons (IDP), conservative estimates calculate the number at 5.6 million people, and despite improvements following the peace accords of 2016, it still presents 139,000 people being displaced in a single year in 2019 (IDMC, 2020). However, another estimate assesses that between 1985 and 2016 up to 6.9 million people were forced out of their homes (Saldarriaga & Hua, 2019, p. 1). These numbers are the more striking when considering they represent well over 10% of the national population.

Though both armed conflict and natural disasters are responsible for most forced migration or displacement,

conflict-displaced and disaster-displaced populations differ fundamentally in terms of the events that precipitate displacement. While natural disasters are non-intentional “acts of nature,” armed conflict involves intentional human malevolence and harm. Conflict-induced displacement is a human-perpetrated act. (Schultz et al., 2014, p. 14).

Despite the strong consequences of climate change becoming one of the main drivers of forced displacement in recent years (Saldarriaga & Hua, 2019, p. 2), disaster-displaced populations face a very different scenario when it comes to hopes of returning to their land. Whereas

most disaster-displaced persons are able to return to their homes within days or months to repair or rebuild once the natural disaster threat subsides ... conflict-displaced persons usually cannot return home because their communities of origin are controlled, and typically occupied, by the armed actors who forced their expulsion. (Schultz et al., 2014, p. 14)

Displacement usually means permanent relocation. The journeys of those who are displaced imply a dislocation, a loss of identity and a state of vulnerability in the process of moving from one place – familiar and known – to a new place, where interactions, networks and processes are foreign, often aggressive. Powell (2012) describes this process of alienation from one's own identity as the birth of a new hybrid identity. She states that

displacement is a jolt to one's sense of self—a jolt to one's identity. If we think of displacement not in terms of moving from one place to another, which suggests a journey that ends, but rather in terms of transition, displacement then becomes a temporal space where identities are metonymic in relation to one another (p. 301).

Displacement becomes, at once, a fracture from a lineal identity and a new marker of identity that represents someone who is never completely part of the place of origin or the place of destination. This is a violent fracture of the sense of identity that takes a strong toll on the person's psyche. The desire to return to a place that was anchored in the fractured identity is a constant drive, an undying call to return to ontological security. But the sad reality is that

Once displaced, most Colombian IDPs are displaced for life, and potentially, for multiple generations. Children are born into displacement and it is likely they will remain IDPs lifelong. So far, no effective remedies have been found to allow IDPs to safely return to their communities of origin and reclaim their property. (Schultz, et al., 2014, p. 15)

Thus, the strong impact of the displacement becomes a clear marker in the lives of families, for generations. This situation engenders rhetorics of displacement which become “strategies that account for discourses of power and discourses of identity” (Powell, 2012, p. 302). Powell states that two contrasting rhetorics coexist in which the people who have been displaced build their new identity: through autobiographic narratives told by those displaced with senses of nostalgia of their paradise lost, or in reports about them which may underplay some of the forces that drove them into displacement.

In Colombia, there are two moments which account for most forced internal displacement, the period of *la Violencia*, between the 1940s and 1960s, and the drug wars/armed conflict from the 1980s onward. The *Violencia* period could be responsible for well over 300,000 deaths and 2 million people forcefully displaced, ending with the two ruling parties' power-share deal (Miller, 2020, p. 24). The second period, stemming from the increase in the illegal trade of drugs and the strengthening of the *guerrilla* groups and the appearance of paramilitary groups in response to them, “unleashes a second migratory wave that starts to exhibit an overpopulation and reconfiguration of the large urban centers according to warring dynamics” (Muñoz Lopera, 2016, p. 33). The separation between violent crime and systematic conflict disappeared in Colombia (Miller, 2020, p. 28), and drug trade was both a gang problem in urban centers and the fuel for conflict in rural areas.

Undoubtedly, the impact of such a large population under forced displacement has not been unnoticed by academia, journalism and the arts. As mentioned by Powell (2012), “when displaced persons are forced out of their homes because of natural disasters or war, we expect their stories to fulfill certain narrative expectations of othered-ness, victimization and dependence of the state” (p. 308). Yet, as she also points out, these is harder to address when the displacement is due to official or state-sanctioned orders, as in the case of eminent domain expropriations. In the Colombian case, the fact that the internal conflict includes illegal anti- and pro-government groups, as well as state-sponsored violence, whether legal or illegal, makes the picture muddled, as the State cannot be seen clearly as protector or provider of rights.

In Colombia, the magnitude of the forced displacement is, thus, consequence of a two-way storyline: that of the violation of human rights and the establishment of a new institutional order (Muñoz Lopera, 2016, p. 28). Forced displacement is exerted from a variety of actors, which can be based on the development of illegal activities, such as drug harvesting, but could also be due to intentional government-supported legal activities such as gold mining or the building of a dam for a power station. This difficulty to discern the role of the state in the process of generating displacement, leads to the IDPs to have as many reservations with institutional officers and government officials as they do with illegal drug-runners and *guerrilla* warlords.

Narratives of displacement and the noir western

In film, similar narratives of displacement can be found in one of Hollywood’s most renowned genres, namely the Western. In a classic text by André Bazin (2004, pp. 140-148) considered the western as the American genre *par excellence*. He argued that the western is a mythical epic of man versus nature, hence the fight against all odds and the wide-shots, respectively. Women are the true examples of virtue in the western, and “all up and down the social scale, are in every case worthy of love or at least of esteem or pity” (p. 144). In general, “the Western genre’s convention [is] that only sexually pure White women—either virginal ingenueé or devoted mother—can properly represent Civilization” (Schwarz, 2014, p. 59). On the other hand, men are often in conflict between righteousness and wrongdoing, since “the sheriff is not a better person than the man he hangs” (Bazin, 2004, p. 146), putting the struggle between law and chaos, rather than between good and evil. Finally, in the barren landscapes of the American west, under the savage and untamed lands of the western, “it is the women who are good and the men who are bad, so bad that the best of them must redeem themselves from the original sin of their sex by undergoing various trials” (p. 144). The characters often come from afar, experiencing this journey as a salvation road. The American Civil War is often the reason why some battered soldiers reach the West, to redeem their loss and become the heroes, by bringing civilization and justice to the savage indigenous lands. It allows for the defeated to become part of the American nation by bringing their dignity and cultural values to the land of chaos. Through this process, while “the Civil War is part of nineteenth century history, the western has turned it into the Trojan War of the most modern of epics. The migration to the West is our Odyssey” (p. 148).

Thus, the western is a site of moral conflict between what is lawful and what is right, with men making decisions between these poles and women highlighting the path to righteousness. However, these clear narrative elements experience a change in the aftermath of the Second World War. The new genre could be considered a hybrid between the western and *Film Noir*, a rising genre at the time that has not received proper acknowledgement (Monticone, 2014).

Monticone (2014) presents a contrast between classic westerns and the *noir* western by highlighting the change in the archetypical characters and the adoption of themes and situations closer to the *film noir*. Both female and male characters changed considerably, as did the plots and dialogues. Female characters went beyond the brothel girls and schoolmarms to include cattle queens and businesswomen. Male characters had postwar/posttraumatic psyches and social difficulties. The plots thickened and the twists were more commonplace. Dialogue increased in length and allowed for the characters to present their motivations and backstories more profoundly. These characteristics made westerns less appealing to the masses, but more interesting as films (see Table 1).

Monticone (2014) goes on to find the characteristics of *film noir* pouring into the western male characters, in the case of hardboiled agents, psychologically-troubled weak heroes and war-torn protagonists. He also finds some *femme fatale* roles in the *noir* western, although not as prominently as the male character's similitude to *film noir* archetypes. Other narrative devices, such as voice-over narration and flashbacks, are not common in these *noir* westerns. However, regarding the central narrative structure, he points out that

The most consistent source of *noir*'s dark worldview and bleak themes is its typical ending. These stories come to no good end, typically culminating in either the hero's death or imprisonment. This noir tendency tends not to carry over into the western. (p. 343)

Similarly, Jelača (2014) finds that the transfer of characteristics from *film noir* to western is to be expected, because they

share the central preoccupation with a male outlaw/anti-hero who stands alone against all, but mainly against the society and its laws. And this outlaw/anti-hero also typically stands between two women/*femme fatales* who are not always what they seem to be at first. The difference seems to be the setting: in the Western, it is the mythical frontier; in film noir, it is the mythical modern urban decay. (p. 255)

In her text, Jelača (2014) goes on to explore the way in which certain western films interconnect with her own memories, experience and perspectives on the Bosnian war of the first half of the 1990s. She links the plight of the indigenous peoples, represented in western films, to the representation of Bosnian women victims of mass rape by Western feminist scholarship. She finds that in both cases there is a reductionistic narrative, a position she clearly rejects. But the parallels she derives between both plights become interesting, because they portray, not only how films relate to our own experiences and help us make sense of our own realities, but how films constitute one of many stories to be told about specific historical experiences.

Noir western films¹ are about psychologically troubled characters, often suffering from post-traumatic war experiences, and delving with a confusing understanding of legality, legitimation and righteousness, where women overcome the narrow definition of innocence and purity, to become decided women and *femme fatales*. The new complexities of the *noir* western put into question the effectivity of the quest for civilization. The historical injuries on the indigenous peoples and the

¹ Monticone (2014) considers as examples of this subgenre “seven films released during the 1947-8 and 1948-9 seasons and identified as *noir* westerns in recent literature. These films are: *Ramrod*, Warner Bros.'s *Pursued* (1947) and *Colorado Territory* (1949), RKO's *Station West* (1948) and *Blood on the Moon* (1948), Columbia's *The Man from Colorado* (1948), and Fox's *Yellow Sky* (1948)” (p. 338).

constant reinvention of the civilization effort of justice and the law, presents a more complex reading of western films.

	Male Character	Female Character	Plot	Narrative elements	Ending
Western	Strong, masculine, invulnerable hero	Innocent pure lady / good-hearted cabaret dancer	Linear, lofty ideals, the value of the law	Wide-shots, landscape views, human vs. nature	Heroic prowess and conquest
Noir Western	Weak, psychologically-troubled, hero	Entrepreneurial strong woman / <i>femme fatale</i>	Twisted, uncertainty of the value of law, justice and righteousness	Human vs. inner demons. Few flashbacks/voice over.	Personal success and satisfaction

Table 1: Characteristics of the western and the noir western

If western films are about taming the wild lands, and *noir* westerns bring a glimpse of doubt to the cause for civilization, bridging the mythical frontier with urban despair, as per Jelača's (2014) appreciation, the rhetoric of displacement lived in Colombia through films seems to connect well with this description. A rural war that drives persons to be displaced to the cities, becomes one of the main elements that constitutes the Colombian experience. Its representation in film would allow us to see in how far these films can be considered contemporary versions of the *noir* western.

Colombian cinema and armed conflict

The lengthy history of the Colombian armed conflict can be traced back to the liberal guerrillas of the 1940s and it has extended to this day –making it the longest-lasting armed conflict in the world–, yet it has not been shown often in Colombian films. The armed conflict refers to the confrontation between guerrilla groups formed from 1964 onwards (some traceable to the liberal guerrillas of the 1940s) versus the State's armed forces and criminal paramilitary groups that became strengthened by the increasing onslaught of guerrilla warfare in the early 1990s, although they were culprits of atrocities and displacement on the sidelines of the national reality well before that. On top of that, there was a growing relationship between armed groups and drug cartels at that time.

On the eve of Law 814 of 2003, known as “Cinema Law” in Colombia, there was an unexpected increase in films made every year in the country. The first two decades of the 21st century have seen the production and exhibition of 65% of all Colombian films². Between 1964 and 2007 there were 224 films made, out of which only 20 address the armed conflict (Rivera Betancur & Ruíz, 2010), whereas between 2008 and 2020, 330 films have been produced and exhibited, with at least 39 of them addressing the armed conflict (see Table 2), almost doubling in just 12 years any previous production on the subject in Colombia.

² Even factoring in the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on national film productions as of November 2020.

Furthermore, the beginning of peace talks in 2012 between the longest running guerrilla group in the world (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) and the national government to the signing of the peace agreements in 2016, set the scene in the second decade of the 21st century to produce a great number of films on the subject, providing a more nuanced and critical perspective. Films have been regarded to as having a key role in the recovery from the horror of the conflict and in providing elements to address the losses experienced (Rueda, 2019, p. 101). These movies provide a more nuanced interest in addressing the aftermath of the conflict and the number of films and points of view increased manifold. As Rueda has pointed out, these films have the daunting task of allowing the apprehension of the complexity and weight of dealing with such a lengthy violent past (p. 115).

It is also important to highlight, however, that the movies based on topics regarding drugs and drug trade have been excluded, even though aspects of the conflict might become part of the plot. Finally, it is also worth noting that in some cases the affiliation of the armed combatants presented in the films is rarely openly shown, which requires a profound knowledge and experience with the characteristics of the armed conflict to be able to attempt to assign sides.

Film	Director	Year	Topics/Background
PVC1	Spiros Stathoulopoulos	2008	Guerrilla, terrorism.
Los actores del conflicto	Lisandro Duque	2008	Peace process, guerrilla, paramilitary forces.
La milagrosa	Rafael Lara	2008	Guerrilla, kidnapping.
Yo soy otro	Óscar Campo	2008	Terrorism
La pasión de Gabriel	Luis Alberto Restrepo	2009	Guerrilla, army, paramilitary forces.
Retratos en un mar de mentiras	Carlos Gaviria	2010	Paramilitary forces, displacement.
El páramo	Jaime Osorio	2011	Guerrilla, army.
Pequeñas voces	Jairo Carrillo and Óscar Andrade	2011	Guerrilla, paramilitary forces, army, victims, minors, displacement, massacres.
Todos tus muertos	Carlos Moreno	2011	Paramilitary forces, corruption, gobierno, massacres.
Los colores de la montaña	Carlos Arbeláez	2011	Paramilitary forces, guerrilla, displacement.
La Sirga	William Vega	2012	Paramilitary forces, displacement.
Mateo	María Gamboa	2014	Paramilitary forces, blackmail.
Carta a una sombra	Daniela Abad and Miguel Salazar	2015	Human rights, paramilitary forces, army.
Siempre viva	Klych López	2015	Guerrilla, army.
Antes del fuego	Laura Mora	2015	Guerrilla, army.
Alias María	José Luis Rugeles	2015	Guerrilla, forced recruitment, minors.
Violencia	Jorge Forero	2015	Paramilitary forces, army, guerrilla, kidnapping, “falsos positivos”, massacres.
Un asunto de tierras	Patricia Ayala	2015	Guerrilla, paramilitary forces, displacement.
Sabogal	Sergio Mejía and Juan Luis Lozano	2015	Guerrilla, paramilitary forces, human rights.
Oscuro animal	Felipe Guerrero	2016	Guerrilla, massacres, paramilitary forces, sexual violence.

Noche herida	Nicolás Rincón Guille	2017	Army, displacement, “falsos positivos”.
El silencio de los fusiles	Natalia Orozco	2017	Peace process, guerrilla, government.
La sargento Matacho	William González	2017	Army, guerrilla.
Sal	William Vega	2018	Guerrilla.
Una selfie con Timochenko	Juan Pablo Salazar and Álvaro Perea	2018	Guerrilla, peace process.
Ciro y yo	Miguel Salazar	2018	Guerrilla, paramilitary forces, army, displacement, massacres.
La negociación	Margarita Martínez	2018	Peace process, guerrilla, government.
La mujer de los siete nombres	Daniela Castro y Nicolás Ordóñez	2018	Peace process, guerrilla, government.
Tres escapularios	Felipe Aljure	2018	Guerrilla, vengeance.
Monos	Alejandro Landes	2019	Guerrilla, kidnapping, menores en el conflicto.
Alma de héroe	Felipe Pardo	2019	Guerrilla, army, venganza.
El silencio del río	Carlos Tribiño	2019	Masacres, guerrilla, paramilitary forces.
Los silencios	Beatriz Werner	2019	Paramilitary forces, massacres.
El Amparo	Rober Calzadilla	2019	Army, massacres.
La forma del presente	Manuel Correa	2019	Guerrilla, paramilitary forces, army, peace process.
La sinfónica de los Andes	Martha Rodríguez	2020	Guerrilla, paramilitary forces, peace process.
Sumercé	Victoria Solano	2020	Rural issues in the armed conflict
La bronca	Daniel and Diego Vega	2020	Violence-led migration.

Table 2: Colombian films dealing with issues related to the armed conflict.

As has been mentioned, forced displacement is one of the negative consequences following the upsurge of the Colombian armed conflict, and its screen representation is relevant since it makes audiences aware of this situation, going beyond cold statistics and media shows made around the issue by mainstream news outlets.

Three Colombian films on displacement

The films made and exhibited after the beginning of the peace talks in the 2012 and, even more so, after the signing of the Peace Agreements in 2016, had the chance to address and imagine the realities of a post-conflict scenario, despite being marked by a creative tension between local and transnational forces (Rueda, 2019, p. 105). However, in the space before the peace talks, in the years between 2003 and 2012, at the dawn of the 2003 Cinema Law, these aspects had been addressed, not focusing on a discussion of coming to terms with the past, but rather, experiencing the impact of violence firsthand. Documentaries of that decade see the nation as a sick and schizophrenic body, a nation in ruins (Suárez, 2010, p. 1). Similarly, fiction films addressed this sense of despair from the perspective of the victims, through depictions of the plight of internally displaced persons.

For this study, three feature-length films have been selected, representing three moments of internal (forced) migration in Colombia stemming from violent causes. These three films were exhibited between 2003 and 2012, and they are told from the perspectives of victims. The films selected are *La primera noche* (Restrepo, 2003), *Retratos en un mar de mentiras* (Gaviria, 2010) y *Los colores de la montaña* (Arbeláez, 2011).

Here is a brief summary of the three films:

La primera noche [the first night]: The couple of Toño and Paulina are farmers who have been displaced from their birthland. The couple arrives to the capital city, Bogota, with their toddler and, after having found no alternative, they end up spending their first night in Bogota sleeping in the streets, facing a cold and unfriendly urban sprawl.

Los colores de la montaña [The colours of the mountain]: Manuel is a 9 year-old kid who lives in the rural countryside. Like any other kid he enjoys playing football (soccer) along with his friends. One day, the new ball lands in a minefield set up by the guerrilla and Manuel and his friends cannot play anymore. The actions of the armed groups against one another become more visible in the town, and Manuel sees how all his friends begin leaving one by one for fears of the outcome of the guerrilla, paramilitary and army confrontation.

Retratos en un mar de mentiras [Portraits on a fake sea]: Jairo and Maria are cousins who live in a shanty town in Bogota. After the death of their grandfather, they begin a journey back to their hometown, trying to claim back the lands of their family, which they have received as inheritance. They take with them the land tenancy documents in the hope of returning to the land of their childhood memories, which was taken from them during the armed conflict.

As these synopses show, the three stories share common ground. These are stories whose main characters are victims of the armed conflict which have –either before, during or after the course of the film’s narrative– been forced to abandon their territory suddenly due to the action of the parties of the armed conflict. They, however, still cling to the hope of a better future, despite their present being nowhere near ideal. The young protagonists, ranging between 9 and 30 years of age, experience or have experienced their freedom hampered and their life goals interrupted by a superior form of fear which has taken over them.

The textual analysis employed has been done through three pillars –the journey, the main character and the character’s mission– that help understand the representation of forced displacement in Colombian cinema. The first pillar (see table 2) looks at the path of the migrant, based on a 5-stage structure, from the standard everyday life to through the changing circumstances, the displacement, the difficulty of a possible settlement elsewhere and the eventual journey back. The five stages are drawn from the ideas presented in the noir western and adapted for our purposes, linked with the debates presented in the introductory and conceptual chapters.

The model is based on the various studies on migration and connects to the aspects of noir western. The similitude of the three films rests on narrative aspects of an absence or lack of confidence in the legally defined authority, the imposition of power through the violence of weapons instead of institutional justice, and the lack of livelihood opportunities.

On the first stage, characters enjoy their everyday, comfortable lives while difficulties are only a background easily overshadowed by the joys of family life. This stage might be present as part of a memory or a flashback, an idealized perfect moment that is nostalgic and missed as it is removed by

force. The rural difficulties are idealized as a simple, relaxed life when seen under the present circumstances.

The second stage then ensues when the *status quo* is altered by a violent action of a party of the armed conflict, demanding the characters to leave their life behind to survive. Life in distress is full of peril and uncertainty, surrounded by a ghastly sense of dread and fear of death, leading the characters to migration as only possible way out.

Thus, the third stage is a journey to the unknown begins, and the promise of a better world rests upon the joy of scaping certain death. The journey is then a process of leaving everything behind and coming to terms with the difficulties of the journey as something that has an end.

The arrival to a new land, the fourth stage, is never as ideal as expected. Quite the opposite, it tends to imply challenges and difficulties which the characters are not ready to face. This new hostile territory demands for people to accept a new reality and for them to acknowledge this is not their home. They long for the forgotten ideal world in their minds.

Thus, whenever given the chance, they try to make it back to their land, ultimately to experience that their ideal home is never attainable. This is the fifth and last stage of the displacement journey. This failed “hero’s journey” renders any return to a peaceful and enjoyable past as impossible, making these stories an utter tragedy.

The following table compiles a description of the plot of each of the films and aligns the specific journey of displacement –the first pillar of our analysis– according to the five stages presented (see Table 3).

	Los colores de la montaña	La primera noche	Retratos en un mar de mentiras
Day-to-day and idealized life	Manuel plays football (soccer) with his friends. He lives at a farm with his family, where he milks the cows with his dad and helps his mom with his little sister. Innocence is presented as the positive trait. The mountains in the mural represent the idealized world.	Toño and his brother are two teenagers on a rural area. They share a comfortable family life together.	Through a series of flashbacks, Marina reminisces of a peaceful life with her family. There is singing, festivities, games and merriment with friends and neighbors.
Life in distress and exile	Manuel and his friends cannot play anymore because the ball landed in the minefield. He begins to find out his classmates must leave their land displaced by the conflict. At the end, the school is closed, and his father murdered.	Toño’s uncle is a guerrilla member, and his brother joins his team. Toño enrolls in the army. There, he discovers his batallion’s illegal runnings. His mother is murdered. Toño and Paulina flee after her murder.	Marina is witness to the incursion of a paramilitary squad into her home. She sees her mother get killed and her house burned down.

Journey to the unknown	Open ending with Manuel and his family leaving their land for an uncertain future.	Toño escapes with his sister in law and her two kids, in the middle of the night, with the help of a neighbor.	[Not portrayed in the film]
Arrival at a hostile (inhospitable) land and adapting to it	[Not portrayed in the film]	Toño and Paulina reach Bogotá looking for a friend they cannot find. They have to spend the night in the Street.	Marina settles in a shack in the shanty towns with her grandfather. He goes mad. She is exploited by a woman who also abuses her.
Return journey home	[Not portrayed in the film]	[Not portrayed in the film]	After her grandfather's death, Marina and Jairo return to the town to claim their land, but they fail to achieve it because they are attacked by the paramilitary squad. Jairo dies.

Table 3: Pillar One- Portrayal of the five stages of displacement.

Pillar two (see table 4 and table 5) is a description of the main characters and their spheres of influence. It is worth bringing attention to their considerable differences, despite all being victims of forced displacement.

FILM	MAIN CHARACTER	AGE	OCUPATION	GENDER
Los colores de la montaña	Manuel	9	Pupil	Male
La primera noche	Toño	28	Former soldier	Male
Retratos en un mar de mentiras	Marina	22	Domestic help	Woman

Table 4: Pillar Two - Basic character descriptions

Film	Character	Social	Professional	Personal (traits and flaws)	Intimate
La primera noche	Toño	Young and introverted, living on the shadow of his brother, whose personality is the opposite of his. He is very devoted to his family.	Farmer who decided to join the army. His moral compass prevents him from having a full army career. He becomes a reject and is displaced.	Introverted, impulsive, aggressive, resentful and untrusting.	In love with his sister-in-law, ready to do anything for her and his nephews.
Los colores de la montaña	Manuel	A loveable kid. Very sociable. Helpful to his family. A leader between his peers.	School pupil. Not the best of his class, but with artistic sensibility.	Hard-headed and curious. Respectful yet cheeky. Loyal friend.	He wants to get his ball back to play with his friends and keep life as simple as it is.
Retratos en un mar de mentiras	Marina	Young and shy, as opposed to her cousin. She lives in her own world of trauma and memories. Some believe she is cognitively impaired. Her own cousin justifies her	Works as domestic help due to lack of skills/chances. She is abused and deprecated by her boss.	Very keen, respectful, silent, introverted, prudent, nervous and easy to startle.	Very afraid and untrusting of others. She feels attracted to her cousin, whom she trusts.

		behavior because of it.			
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Table 5: Pillar Two - Extended character description

Pillar three (see Table 6) looks at the mission of each character, separating the objectives (What is he/she looking for?), motives (Why does he/she do it?), obstacle (Who/what is in the way?), beneficiaries (Who profits?) and the methods (How does he/she goes for it?). These aspects provide us with a general view on the altruism (heroism) of their actions. It is worth pointing out that for *Retratos en un mar de mentiras* it was harder to pick the main character, since Jairo experiences the whole hero's journey –down to the sacrifice at the end– yet the story is told from Marina's perspective, a victim suffering from her fears and trauma. This description of their mission helps us navigate the plot and the conflicting emotions the characters experience through displacement.

Film	Main Character	Objetives	Motives	Obstacles	Beneficiaries	Methods
La primera noche	Toño	Leaving the past behind and having a new life with his sister-in-law and nephews.	Lack of opportunities and a way to escape his former colleagues who killed his family.	Lack of money and acquaintances in a tough hostile city.	His sister-in-law and her kids.	Taking risks, looking for ways to find a place to spend the night in Bogota.
Los colores de la montaña	Manuel	Recover the ball that landed on the minefield to play again.	Joy of playing with his friends	The minefield, the prohibition on the use of the pitch, and the disappearance of his Friends.	Himself and his friends.	Risking his life and limb by ignoring the ban on the use of the pitch and the danger of the minefield.
Retratos en un mar de mentiras	Marina	Reclaim the past / lands.	Return home to the idyllic past.	Land grabbers and paramilitary agents.	Herself and her cousin.	Trusting the value of legality in the form of land tenancy papers.

Table 6: Character's mission

The motive of all three characters involves a deep connection to the land and their goals point toward reclaiming or recovering it. Toño and Paulina are looking for a haven to recover control of their lives and find the hostility of the city. Manuel and his friends want to recover the ball and the pitch to

continue their interrupted youth. Marina dreams of restoring her lost past in the land of her childhood. The protagonist all dream of a simpler and joyful former life, willing to risk life and limb to recover their previous happiness. But despite their high hopes and lofty intentions, their destiny is tragic.

Undoubtedly, all three films are metaphorical. The first night in the big city is the plight of every night, an allegory of the suffering of being unrooted from your place of safety. The minefield is the metaphor for all violence: a latent fear of a horrid outcome. It sits there, yet it plagues the mind. The pictures on a fake sea tell us that documents –including photographs– and land titles mean nothing, because legality is useless when facing armed actors who enact the true might: violence.

These three movies are films of despair. They present the toll of forced displacement upon all victims. Contrasting them with the characteristics of the noir western, it would seem to extend the dire consequences further, drawing more from the struggle and despair of the *noir*, than from the seeming heroism of the western. Characters are weak, since

the type of citizen seen in [national] films [of the 2000-2010 period] is a Colombian with little participation [or say] in the construction of their own life, limited by the influences and impositions of armed groups whose use of brute force presses their social values. (Ceballos Hurtado, 2011, p. 40).

They are tragic figures, unable to avoid their dark fate. Much like the ball that Manuel cannot retrieve from the minefield, these characters are all adrift, lost in dangerous surroundings. And just like Manuel, they can never regain their paradise.

Analysis: From noir western to western noir

Apart from the narrative elements and the roles and motivations of the characters, there are clear visual cues that connect these films with common tropes of the western. The closing scene in *Los colores de la montaña*, just like one of the departure of Toño and Paulina at the beginning of *La Primera noche*, sees the protagonist departing his land in a small truck, which resembles the stagecoaches taking people to the distant towns of the west.

The presence of the bandits and renegades, typical of westerns, can be seen in *Los colores de la montaña* in the covered faces of the perpetrators of the displacement, their guns and group dynamics, as they come down a truck to pursue the father of Manuel's friend. A similar situation can be found in the scattered shots heard in in the town's siege in *La primera noche* and in the disguised antagonists who reveal themselves at the end of the film in *Retratos en un mar de mentiras*.

Strikingly, all films at some point exhibit the image of a desolate, ghost town on the side of the road, where people are afraid to emerge, if there are any people at all. This image is clearly similar to what is often seen in classic westerns.

Finally, the general visual references to the landscapes, particularly set as ideal places, with long-shots and lush imagery can be found in all three films. Exactly like old Hollywood westerns, the landscape long-shots exhibit the power and dominant force of nature, highlighting the conflicts and hostilities. In *Retratos en un mar de mentiras*, the sea is both a real and metaphoric landscape, a coveted destination which, as the background for photographs, covers the reality of the slums (TC 1m53s). In *La primera noche* the migration of the protagonists with limited possibilities is experienced in the extreme long-shot of the bus driving a small road through the immense mountains (14m57s). Similarly, in *Los colores de la montaña* the panoramic shots of the idyllic fields and landscapes are turned into a metaphor when they use them as reference to paint a mural against the

school's wall to cover the graffiti of the paramilitary (1h6m). In all cases, the vastness of nature, the loneliness of rural life and, conversely, the distance from legal institutions seem to echo the barren wastes of the western, where law is scarce because social interest is as well. The land of those forgotten.

The path of the western genre away for heroism and man vs. land to a more troubled noir western with traumatized war heroes and less lofty enterprises show the loss of innocence after any war, be that the Second World War, the Bosnia War, or the Colombian civil conflict. If noir western became the way to deal with a far more troubled past, the inversion in Colombian cinema leads to a far darker *western noir*. The city, which is oftentimes the place where those who have been removed from their land end up settling, is a cold, unfriendly place. It is the manifestation of a lack of empathy and commiseration. If violent agents of the guerrilla, paramilitary and the army are the monsters that drive people away –the usual gunslingers and outlaws of the western–, the empire of corruption and inequality of the city brings no comfort either. In the Colombian case the process goes further, drawing more elements from the *film noir* and leaving behind many of the expected feel-good moments of the western (see Table 7).

	Male Character	Female Character	Plot	Narrative elements	Ending
Western	Strong, masculine, invulnerable hero	Innocent pure lady / good-hearted cabaret dancer	Linear, lofty ideals, the value of the law	Wide-shots, landscape views, human vs. nature	Heroic prowess and conquest
Noir Western	Weak, psychologically-troubled, hero	Entrepreneurial strong woman / <i>femme fatale</i>	Twisted, uncertainty of the value of law, justice and righteousness	Human vs. inner demons. Few flashbacks/voice over.	Personal success and satisfaction
Western noir	Weak, troubled and psychologically scared victim	Unstable, traumatized victim of abuse	Twisted, no law, no justice	Wide-shots, landscape views, human vs. human cruelty. Flashbacks.	Open-ended tragedy

Table 7: Main characteristics of the western genre and subgenres

The exercise of authority is presented as arbitrary and not following legality or legitimacy. Formal authorities (military or police forces) are commonly associated with unlawfulness and their actions do not seem to foster the common good. In this scenario, characters know they must start their journey with no protection from those whose job it is to care for them. Their primary emotion is despair, their motivation, which starts as hope for a better life, never materializes.

Colombian films on displacement are films of despair, of loss, of unattainable longing. Be it a plot of land, an idyllic memory of rural youth or a football (soccer) game, everything has been lost and cannot be regained. Maybe the coming to terms with the past is a realization of all the grief that has been experienced, the need for empathy towards displaced Colombians, by recognizing all the ways they have been expelled from their lands; to see and listen to these stories and recognize that at least now there is a willingness to talk about that dark, troublesome past (see Ortega Rincón, 2017). This

issue of despair and longing continues into an endless duel in the “films that address the fractures caused by violence, portraying situations in which the characters are overwhelmed by uncertainty, where the future is uncertain and explanations are always insufficient” (Rueda, 2019, p. 106) of the following decade. In agreement with Rueda’s observation, Colombian films in the twenty-first century revolve around dealing with despair through the duel of a loss that cannot be processed, “because what has been lost is irrecoverable and the brutality of such loss overwhelms the ability to rationalize it, which might serve to overcome it” (p. 108). The duel continues to this day.

Conclusion: Colombian cinema and unsurmountable grief

A duel and a coming of terms with a troublesome past is an issue shared with countries from the southern tip of the continent. For instance, Argentinian, Uruguayan and Brazilian cinema draw from the darkest wounds caused of the military dictatorships for their drama, namely forced disappearance, torture and attempts against personal freedoms. They share with Colombian cinema the concern for the psychological and emotional impact of violence upon individuals and the construction of a society where fear of the authorities is commonplace. However, in contrast to other national cinemas of the region, Colombian films exhibit a permanent state of loss and defenselessness in their main characters. There is no confidence in the government and other institutions, and these characters find themselves vulnerable to the armed groups, who often work hand in hand with legal authorities.

On the other hand, Colombian cinema joins Mexican cinema as the only national cinemas that present images of forced displacement from the countryside to the city, although in the Mexican case it is more often associated with a move between Mexico and the United States. Internal migration has been more openly displayed in Colombian films in the last two decades, despite its long history.

Although Latin American cinema seems to share the plight of individuals against forces of violence that overcome them, the Colombian case stands out as one in which the struggle is not connected to a military dictatorship or a specific corrupt government, but rather to a seemingly endless array of gun-wielding criminals that covers all possible figures of authority and power, making the journey of displacement an eternal tragedy.

Colombian western noir is a response to a grief so profound it has shaped generation after generation and continues to the duel and coming-of-terms of the second decade of the twenty-first century. As presented by Rueda (2019) for films during the peace talks and established here for films prior to that, there is still a process of duel in dealing with violent memories. It is a difficult pill to swallow, but one the filmmakers are trying to help Colombians take. Films are hoping to achieve the commiseration and pity for these people which hostile cities and careless criminals have denied them for so long.

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Bios:

Jerónimo Rivera-Betancur is professor and researcher at the Faculty of Communication, Universidad de la Sabana. Doctor in Communication from Universidad de Navarra, M.Ed. from Universidad Javeriana and B.A. in Social Communication from Universidad de Antioquia. He is the director and founder of the Latin American Network on Audiovisual Narratives (Red INAV), author of seven books on film, communication, education and culture. He is the editor-in-chief of the journal *Palabra Clave* and reviewer for the Ministries of Science and Education in Colombia. He writes on film and culture for the newspaper *El Tiempo* and on his blog “Jerónimo Rivera Presenta”.

Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed is professor and researcher at the School of Social Communication and Journalism, Universidad Externado de Colombia. He holds a PhD from Aberystwyth University. His research crosses between audiovisual media, cultural studies, linguistics, and comics, concerned mostly with the transformation of audiovisual products as they cross markets and the developments in minority language media. His most recent publication is the book “Los trabajadores colombianos del cine internacional” (2021, Universidad Externado de Colombia).