

The Globalized Space in *Rosario Tijeras*

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Using anthropologist Marc Augé's theorization about "non-places," in this article I study the problematic relationship between globalization and collective identity within the context of postmodernism. In particular, I focus my study on the representation of spaces in the film *Rosario Tijeras* (Emilio Maillé, 2005). For that purpose, I first explore the titles of sequence of the movie as they foreground the complex juxtaposition between the main spaces of the film underlining the relationships between the characters, the city, and the discotheque. The latter will be analyzed as an example of a "non place" in the last section of the article.

The film *Rosario Tijeras*, based on Jorge Franco's eponymous novel published in 1999, tells the story of Rosario, a prostitute and a contract killer or a *sicaria*, and two young upper class men, Antonio and Emilio, in the late 1980's in Medellín. After the death of her brother, Jonhefe, Rosario tries to escape from her past. Her efforts are in vain and she is finally chased and killed by her former pimp, Ferney. Both, the film and the movie, are part of the boom of cultural manifestations on contract killers or *sicarios* of the past two decades usually labeled with the generic denomination of *sicaresca*.¹

Marc Augé defines "supermodernity" as a concept that refers to the acceleration of factors that defined modernity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Supermodernity expresses itself by creating "non-places," thus establishing a new way in which individuals relate to spaces. According to Augé, "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place." In addition to this, Augé writes "Place and non-place are rather like

opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity is ceaselessly rewritten” (63-64).

As the non-place does not erase the actual place, supermodernity and postmodernity are not concepts that eliminate modernity, but rather question a number of contradictions of the modern discourse that constructs itself as uniform. In Nelly Richard’s words: “Postmodernity is not what appears lineally right after modernity [...] but rather the pretext to its re-reading from the suspicious that its cognoscitive structures and universal design historically bears.”²

Both “postmodernity” and “supermodernity” can be understood as part of a group of terms (such as “post-industrialism,” “hypermodernity,” and “late capitalism”) that try to define these phenomena that lacks a univocal enunciation and that furthermore, change their presentation depending on the origin of the critical discourse and the factors that would like to be emphasized. Thus, as stated by Lyotard, the postmodern shift is related to the incredulity toward the so-called “metanarratives”. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism represents a way to grasp the new and confusing boundaries of late capitalism. For Baudrillard, “postmodernism” is associated with what is usually known as the “loss of the Real.”. That lack of reference would be one of the consequences of the existence of a stream of ultra-technological images and a materialistic hyperreality transmitted through the mass media in contemporary life.

Globalization can be described as a series of events that do not have a homogeneous definition and that provide a number of “symbolic” or “real” goods to certain groups of individuals or to a social class. It is a process that has transformed values and social practices. That has also increased the economic and social differences by implementing policies that, sometimes, help free trade while other times encourage protectionism. In the globalized world, the interests of multinational corporations usually have prevailed, resulting in the unbalanced

power equation between the National States and the markets, in favor of the latter. According to Joseph Stiglitz, “Globalization is a powerful force that has brought enormous benefits to some. Because of the way it has been mismanaged, however, millions have not enjoyed its benefits, and millions more have been made worse off” (253).

Therefore, globalization seems to initially establish an integrative and communicative aim but, in truth, rather than integrate, it promotes segregation and displacement (García Canclini 181). Considering the wide range of definitions, we can conclude that globalization is usually presented as a concept that creates a significant number of imaginaries, discourses and metaphors, as well as spaces and symbolic figures by means of which it can be defined and it can also express itself (García Canclini 11).

These approaches define the context in which we can better understand a movie such as *Rosario Tijeras* within the postmodern and globalized world. As a metaphor and a product of globalization, the number of cultural manifestations in which *sicarios* were a central component has exploded in the past two decades and has blurred borders and genres. Samples of these representations include not only films and novels but also commercials, TV series, music and comics produced all over the world. Colombia is often credited as the origin of this movement. Thus, cultural manifestations as well as critical discourses embraced *sicarios* as a Colombian national product.³ These manifestations have sometimes been praised for providing visibility to a social problem that would otherwise continue to exist, but have also been criticized for providing a reductionist and violent image of the country.

Sicarios, thus, can be considered as a hybrid figure. They are defined by rural and urban qualities, and their practices combine traditional and modern habits (Jácome 204). They can also be interpreted as a symptom of unresolved social and political problems (Cabañas Bravo) as well

as a complex symbol of the new social and economic relations composed by a mix of neo-liberalism, globalization and drug trafficking that produce and reaffirm themselves by means of a new imaginary and the configuration of a number of new spaces.

In this sense, in many of the cultural representations about contract killers located in Latin American countries, Medellín is being represented as the archetype of the “Sicario-City” that is, at the same time, usually exported as a symbol of Colombia. In these narratives, Medellín would therefore be constructed as a “non-place” in which the multiplicity of globalized signs and spaces entail a struggle with its relational and historical identity. Medellín is portrayed as a market, a trade space in which everything is ephemeral. All the businesses related to “death industry”, as well as the *sicario*, as the agent that distributes death, therefore constitute Medellín’s “new” identity signs. These representations of the images and the spaces related to *sicarios* also reveal the tensions between global and local in the globalized context:

Globalization, paradoxically, has led to a strengthening of local ties, allegiances, and identity politics within different nation-state formations, even though what may emerge is what Stuart may call that more “tricky version” of ‘the local’ which operates within, and has been thoroughly reshaped by the global and operates largely within its logic (Wilson and Dissanayake, 5).

Therefore, in many of the films produced or set in Colombia over the past twenty years in which *sicarios* are a central character, such as *Rosario Tijeras*, there is a particular version of the local portrayed by a contract killer constructed as symbol who represents not only the city of Medellín itself, but also Colombia as a whole country in the globalized world.⁴ Within this context, it is crucial to study the main spaces and the type of relationships they established as a way to approach the complex layers in which identity is built.

The city as a globalized space

As it was previously mentioned, the opening titles foreshadow the relationship between the different spaces of the movie. In order to gain a better understanding of the relations of the portrayal of *sicarios* and the configuration of space in *Rosario Tijeras*, it is key to analyze in detail the title sequence of the film which can be divided into three sections. The first one, combines the references to the movie production and the image of a pair of scissors that are opening and closing. This image cannot entirely be seen giving the impression that these parts were being lighted as they were part of a show. Transition to the second part is done by means of a fade-out that introduces the spectator to a series of brief extreme close-ups and cuts that shows different fragments of body parts in an ethereal and impersonal space. At that moment, there is no further information about the characters or the space that later on will be identified as the discotheque. The third part of the opening titles represents a city in the night by means of some aerial shots.

The space of the discotheque and the city juxtapose themselves, as there is no apparent relationship between the two of them. Just the nondiegetic music seems to establish some sense of continuity. Transition between the second and the third section is made by means of the nondiegetic sound of a gun shot and the subsequent presence of a red stain (that resembles blood) that “floods” over the screen while a city is represented in a lower level. When this section is about to be over, it can be seen the name “Rosario Tijeras” superposed in red, with the city in the background. Just slightly after that, there is a space-time mark “Medellín, Colombia, 1989” which finishes these opening titles.

These images introduce the spectator to a fragmented, futurist and hyperrealist space. They also set the tone and the perception of the spectator to the city and the characters. The way

the scissors are represented as something artificially lighted and also divided in sections, as a part of a show, provides a certain parallel between this section and the second one in which different parts of two different bodies are shown.

At the same time, the myth of the main character, Rosario Tijeras, is established giving more importance to one part of its name (with its symbolic connotations) in detriment of the other one. These opening titles also establish the distance that is going to be present in the rest of the movie. What is going to be seen is something fragmented that will require a sort of artificial light in order to actually be seen.

Rosario's fragmented body precedes the city in the opening credits. Both, this city and Rosario's body are showed as fragmented and they multiply themselves until becoming a bloodstained corpse, just barely recognizable by their names which are, in fact, fake ones. Rosario's name (that is superposed, and written in the city) left her forever marked, as well as Medellín's name (also known as *Medallo* or *Metrallo*) left also marked the space it refers to. Both names are surrounded by myths that refer to an empty center which also highlights a crisis of identity.

There is a distant gaze of the city in which the *comunas*, Medellín's marginal areas, do not have their own space to the extent that they are barely noticed in this nocturnal image. During the movie, the significant amount of panoramic shots reflects this distance. They work as a parenthesis but also as a reminder of what the spectator is seeing: Medellín. However, these inserts also work as a travel magazine: they sell the illusion that what the reader is looking at is the actual city when, in fact, this city could be some other place. This effect is reinforced in the movie by the number of shots taken from the *comunas* perspective that will emulate a sort of collective gaze from the "non-represented."

There is an attempt to include a certain type of representations and, in doing so, showing a sort of interaction between the center and the marginalized spaces previously described as one of the indicators of the “other side” of globalization. Thus, Rosario’s personal story is related to the *comunas*. However, this space is not constructed as the main one in the film. It is still marginal within the movie itself. Rosario just goes back to the *comuna* in very significant moments in which she performs the rituals of mourning and death. Her mother’s house or the cemetery, both located in the *comuna*, mainly appear as spaces of memory that are juxtaposed to her memories. They invade other spaces by means of a flashback but they are always juxtapositions, there is no real integration in this whole new space as there is no real integration in the globalized space that is being represented. It is a constant presence that is a component of Rosario’s identity, but it is always both marginal and marginalized.

This initial representation of the city is tagged with a short label: “Medellín, Colombia. 1989.” In doing so, this space and time mark leads and warns us. The spectator needs to return to a very specific and chaotic time in which the whole country was involved in one of the most severe stages of the war between drug cartels, the government, the guerrilla, and the paramilitary forces. It was also the time in which the proliferation of cultural manifestations about *sicarios* began. There is an intention of reference to a very significant space and time. This attempt of inscription in history underlines the tension between place and non-place, as we will later see.

However, very few things contribute to place the spectator back in that time during the film. Songs played in the movie could be from many different time periods, not exacting the music that would probably have been listened to in that particular time. There is no reference to recognizable figures, with the exception of a brief mention of Pablo Escobar. The “modernizing” aesthetics of the film would also refer to a time before the diegetic time in which the film is

supposed to take place or that, at least, it is said to be portrayed, which also produces some tensions.

Therefore, there is a certain displacement between the clothing we see and the music we hear in the movie. That introduces us to a key issue. Many of the testimonies as well as the articles about that time insist in the exaggeration of the mannerisms and the taste of the drug lords¹, as well as in the accelerated changes that drug trafficking produced in the society in a short amount of time. In *Rosario Tijeras*, this sort of fiction presents itself as fable not entirely accurate which would provide a more faithful effect of the actual and surreal “reality” of the time is pretended to be portrayed.⁶

In sum, the juxtaposition of these three parts of the opening credits underlines the relationship between myth, symbolized in the scissors, the main character, and the city that will be crucial throughout the whole film. It also highlights the connection between the mythical space and the apparent “real” space of the city in which the discotheque will participate in the characteristics of both of them and will serve as a link that is placed in a central position.

The discotheque as a non-place

The discotheque, therefore, is established from the opening credits as a central space as well as a space from trade in which simulacrum is enacted. In order to gain better understanding of the actual connotations of the representation of the discotheque in *Rosario Tijeras* we would need to go back to Marc Auge’s words:

The installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods (high-speed roads and railways, interchanges, airports) are just as much non-places as the means of transport themselves, or the great commercial centres, or the extended transit camps where the planet’s refugee are camped. (28)

¹ As in Abad Faciolince’s article “Estética y narcotráfico” above-mentioned.

The discotheque in *Rosario Tijeras* would not only be a non-place, but would also represent the sum of the non-places in this film. The disco is an impersonal space in which most of the recognizable identity signs have been eroded. It is a space in which there is an acceleration of the circulation of people and goods, something also mirrored in the rest of Medellín, and at the same time resembling and contrasting the dynamics of the city, as it was underlined by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste: "The disco-with a recurring allusion to the city's infernal nature concealed in the club's title-contrasts wildly with the sordidness of slum establishments" (553).

In *Rosario Tijeras*, the discotheque substitutes the shopping mall. In *La Virgen de los Sicarios/ Our lady of the Assassins* (Fernando Vallejo's novel 1994; Barbet Schroeder film, 2000), it was the former Catholic Seminar that was turned into a shopping mall. Now the latter is displaced by the discotheque that plays the same functions of both a public square and a trade place, and that will also be transformed into another non-place called "Padova" at the end of the movie. This space is characterized by simulacrum; it is a fictional space. The dynamics of consumerism present themselves disguised in this non-place: the disco. This non-place seems to be a sort of scale representation of the non-place in which the city has been turned into. However, the question is rather complex since they do not establish a pure and mimetic relationship. It is rather a sort of symbiosis. They are different formulations of the non-place archetype. Both the discotheque and the city influence, resemble and complement each other, as we will see later on.

The discotheque is constructed as a space in which time seems to stop to the extent it could be located anywhere. One of the few things that give some hint of local color is the presence of the drug lords (*los duros*) who are in the upper level showing again how Colombian identity is portrayed as related to drug trafficking. It is also the first space remembered by

Antonio since it is there where he makes visual contact for the first time with Rosario. The name of the discotheque (“Aquarius”), as well as the blue lighting and the mise-en-scene (mainly composed of fish tanks), reinforce the effect of being in a cold place, out of time, in which characters are exposed just for the pleasure of others.

In this non-place, there is a negotiation with the identity by means of a number of rituals of love and death. These rituals are transformed, repeated or inverted in other spaces of the movie by means of a number of visual patterns. Thus, it can be noticed how one of Rosario’s apartments keep the two level structure as well as the stairs present in the discotheque and, even the bar stools resemble the ones of the discotheque. In fact, this apartment is one of the spaces in which the rituals are continued, and in which identity keeps being negotiated. However, seduction is not only a part of the love rituals, but death is also expanded. Thus, the killings that seemed to be restricted to certain spaces are taking place in other areas of the city. The *sicario* is, therefore, the agent in charge of administering and “democratizing” death.

In this sense, there is also a significant scene in the apartment of a judge who is killed by Rosario. This space repeats the pattern of the two levels of the disco seen in many of the spaces of the movie. It again shows how the rituals of love and death are connected in the movie. Rituals take place inside a private space divided in two: the main room where the seduction begins, and the balcony where the actual killing takes place. The latter moment resembles a prior dialogue between Rosario and Antonio with the city in the background. It is an anonymous city. This killing seems to be initially a parenthesis in the whole plot of the movie. It does not have an apparent connection between both scenes it is placed into. However, it has the function of presenting Rosario as a professional. It also points out how violence and death invade public and private spaces without taking into consideration social classes or professional occupations. That

is also related to the attempt of showing marginal places as mentioned above. Democratizing death implies that the upper class is also suffering the consequences of violence rather than just the marginalized individuals of the *comunas*.

As it was mentioned, at the end of the movie, the disco's name changed to "Padova". When Rosario gets there at the end of the movie she is confused. "Aquarius", once the space of trade and hallucination, is already transformed into another place. People look younger and they dress differently compared to the "usual" crowd. The same music of the opening credits is being played. Rosario does not belong to this environment. While she is waiting for Antonio, she goes to the bar and starts smoking alone without talking to anyone. Antonio is trapped in the line outside the disco. As soon as he gets in, he sees Ferney first kissing and then shooting Rosario just before the bloodstained body of Rosario crosses the crystal floor.

In the movie *Rosario Tijeras*, we witnessed the rise and fall of a *sicario/a* as well as the cycle of creation and disappearance of a non-place. It is a never-ending process since we also see how the new non-place ("Padova") is created and written within the space of a former one ("Aquarius"). This transformation of the space highlights the emptiness of the discotheque that is constructed as the main space reference from the opening titles. Most of the spaces of the film had the disco as reference that now loses its name and consequently loses its identity unmasking the presence of the non-place. Once this non-place is unmasked, the *sicario's* identity is also questioned and death takes place. Rosario's body is now written within the history of this non-place. This circular moment happens in the moment in which the central space of the movie is substituted.

Conclusions

In *Rosario Tijeras*, Medellín is represented without almost any other sign of identity by means of a multiplication and fragmentation of a certain type of spaces in which their identity is redefined. In Medellín's representation of *Rosario Tijeras*, there are few recognizable spaces, except for the recreation of the *comunas* in some scenes and some establishing shots that frame the city as a background. That results in a globalized and impersonal space, with a certain touch of localism.

The identification between the space that is said to be represented (Medellín) and the main character (Rosario) is produced in different layers reflecting individual and collective conflicts of identity. Thus, Rosario is a character close to the classical "hitman" (more often related to other cultural traditions). However, there is an attempt to provide the character with a personal history related to the Medellín's *comunas* through the retelling of her story and the apparent overcoming of her social situation by becoming a "successful" *sicaria* (that will ultimately result in her death). That tension between the global and the local fulfills the portrayal of a hybrid character that does not belong anywhere. This lack of feeling of belonging anywhere was underlined by García Canclini as one of the main points related to the globalized imaginary in which identities are conformed by a combination of local, national and transnational components (166). Rosario is depicted as a symbol of the violence that is reenacted, as well as a symbol of the new commercial relationships in which the interaction between space and time is constantly being redefined. Rosario, as most of the *sicarios*, serves as the link between spaces and social classes, but in the end belongs to none of them.

As we have seen, the movie establishes the tension between place and non-place. The globalized space shows a numbers of displacements between diegetic space and time. The sum

of these globalized non-places with a center located in the discotheque (a space mirrored or inverted in many other spaces of the movie) construct the identity of the place labeled as “Medellín”. This combination of non-places that entails spaces of trade and memory, as well as central and marginal spaces, is also a prominent part of Rosario’s character conforming a complex and conflictive identity that is persistently redefining itself.

Notes

¹The term *sicaresca antioqueña* was commonly popularized after Héctor Abad Faciolince's article "Estética y narcotráfico" first published in 1995. The concept is being disputed by some critics such as Óscar Osorio who, focusing on the study of the novels about *sicarios*, proposed the term *literatura del sicariato*. Osorio referred to the novel "El sicario" (Mario Bahamon Dussan, 1988) published in Cali in order to question the regional origin of the phenomena. Osorio argued that Bahamón Dussan's novel preceded some of the landmarks of this sub-genre such as *Rodrigo D. No futuro/Rodrigo D. No future* (Víctor Gaviria, 1990), *No nacimos pa' semilla/Born to die in Medellín* (Alonso Salazar J., 1990), and *El pelaíto que no duró nada* (Víctor Gaviria, 1991).

²My translation.

³The controversy about the regional origin of the literature about *sicarios* mentioned above also ended up contributing to the configuration of *sicarios* as a Colombian national product exported internationally.

⁴That also helped in order to sell *sicarios* as a "Colombian national product," as it was previously mentioned.

⁵As in Abad Faciolince's article "Estética y narcotráfico" above-mentioned.

⁶The *sicario*, in this case, seems to come from the "future" underlining a significant switch in the sub-genre from "a neorealist experimentation (*Rodrigo D. No futuro*) to full-blown commodification (*Rosario Tijeras*)" as it was pointed out by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste. Therefore, in most of the movies considered the symbolic start of the boom of the cultural manifestations about *sicarios*, such as *Rodrigo D. No futuro/Rodrigo D. No Future* (Víctor Gaviria, 1990), there was an effort to show characters that were close to reality, working in

natural settings with amateur actors. In movies, such as *Rosario Tijeras* there is a conscious distance between the idealized representation of a *sicaria*, in which the main character is no longer a kid from the street, but rather a young lady who provokes desire in others.

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