

Testimonial Ties and the Space of the Medellín Comuna in *Diario en Medellín* and *La Sierra*

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Resumen

En este ensayo, se compara la presentación de los problemas sociales de las comunas en dos documentales recientes de Colombia. Aunque tanto *Diario en Medellín* (1998) como *La Sierra* (2004) tratan de los mismos barrios marginales de Medellín, el estilo, la producción, y la autoría de estas películas contrastan marcadamente. A la vez, una diferencia fundamental que afecta al tono de cada documental es un grado distinto de vinculación a una tradición testimonial de América Latina (específicamente la del testimonio y Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano). La divergencia de estilo y de metodología de estas películas temáticamente congruentes resulta más evidente en las entrevistas que realicé a los directores de *Diario en Medellín* y *La Sierra*, de las cuales se incluyen fragmentos a lo largo del ensayo. Al tratar de un tema específico de maneras tan distintas, estos documentales—cuando se analizan juntos—a la larga nos ofrecen una visión amplia del ámbito de los problemas sociales que afectan a la población heterogénea de las comunas medellinenses.

Palabras Clave: documental, comuna, Colombia, testimonio, violencia

Abstract

In this article, I compare the presentation of comuna-related social problems in two recent Colombian documentaries. Although *Diario en Medellín* (1998) and *La Sierra* (2004) both treat the same marginalized Medellín periphery, the style, production, and authorship of these films contrast sharply. At the same time, a fundamental difference impacting the tone of each documentary is the varying degree to which they preserve ties to a Latin American testimonial tradition (specifically that of testimonio and New Latin American Cinema). The stylistic and methodological divergence between these two thematically congruent films is further elucidated in my interviews with the directors of *Diario en Medellín* and *La Sierra*, segments of which are threaded throughout this article. Through their treatment of a singular subject matter in starkly different ways, these documentaries—when examined alongside one another—ultimately piece together the evolving range of social problems that affect the heterogeneous population of Medellín shantytowns.

Key Words: Documentary, Shantytown, Colombia, Testimony, Violence

During the past sixty years in Colombia, mass rural displacement to urban shantytowns has increasingly occurred as a result of poverty, public policy, and violence. Millions of rural workers have migrated to Medellín and Bogotá where, for most, living conditions are not much better than the ones they left behind. While some are able to enter the middle class, the

majority of the new urban inhabitants have built shacks in the *comunas* in the unoccupied areas on the margins of the city. The growth of these two cities—fueled by increasing immigration and the rising value of land—has forced new arrivals to live further and further away from the downtown area. As a result, the past several decades have seen a shift in the comunas from simple ramshackle communities to complex sprawling structures in which drug dealers and religious missionaries coexist with low-income working families, former peasants, shop owners, street children, and drug addicts. Such remarkable diversity within the shantytowns starkly reflects the complexity of displacement and its effects. In the face of a new home void of both opportunities and human resources, some displaced people turn to crime, others to religion, and still others to whatever job they are able to find. Regardless of the different choices that they are forced to make in their daily struggle to survive, shantytown residents must live together in a new urban landscape in which they individually (and sometimes collectively) fight for a better life.

Two recent Colombian documentaries illustrate how violence and the daily struggles of comuna life disparately affect the heterogeneous population of Medellín shantytowns. When viewed together, the question emerges: why do two contemporary documentaries with such a distinctly similar subject matter come across as so different from one another? In this article, I examine the presentation of social problems in these two thematically congruent—but stylistically and methodologically divergent—Colombian films: *Diario en Medellín* (dir. Catalina Villar, 1998) and *La Sierra* (dir. Scott Dalton and Margarita Martínez, 2004). Despite treating the same marginalized urban periphery, the style, production, and authorship of these documentaries contrast sharply, and these differences become even more apparent in my interviews with Villar, Dalton and Martínez. Furthermore, a central dissimilarity affecting the tone of each documentary is the varying degree to which they maintain roots in a Latin American testimonial tradition (specifically that of testimonio and New Latin American Cinema). As they each treat a singular subject matter in starkly different ways, these two films—when viewed together—ultimately testify to the evolving range of social problems that comuna residents face after displacement.

Villar's *Diario de Medellín* focuses on adolescent students in Santo Domingo (a Medellín comuna) who are victims of displacement and the related violence. Their school, although lacking in resources, is run by a teacher, Rubén Darío, who assigns them the task of writing in their notebooks the stories of their lives. In explaining the assignment to the class, Darío (who is just as innovative in his teaching style as his namesake was in poetry) says:

This is the start of your big experience and you must commit fully to it. You're writing the most important book in the world, more important than *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, more important than *Ulysses*... And

what are you going to do? You're going to tell the story of your life, to reconstruct your past so you can cope better with your present and your future. Where are your parents from? From what village? Why did they leave the countryside to come to Medellín and specifically to come to Santo Domingo? (*Diario en Medellín*)

In a sense, these students are writing their own testimonios because they are recording individual stories which are reflective of a collective, underrepresented social condition of Latin America—the ever-growing shantytown population affected by displacement and national violence. Traditionally within the genre of testimonio, the marginal narrators are often not professional writers (as is the case with Darío's students), and they commonly rely on an interlocutor of a more privileged background (like Villar) in order to elicit, publish and circulate their story. Villar sheds light on the value of Darío's assignment as she comments:

Contar las vidas es darles valor... la palabra es lo contrario de la violencia... [y] el diario íntimo era un excelente hilo conductor y un objeto emblemático de lucha contra la violencia... estas historias familiares sirven a la realizadora colombiana para pintar, sin sensacionalismo, una ciudad cargada de violencia. (Villar)

Through testimonios like the assigned diarios, the audience ideally identifies with a normally distant cause. While such solidarity is an intrinsic objective of the genre of testimonio, the possibility for it is even greater in *Diario en Medellín* as a result of the wider audience permitted by film (as compared to that of literature). Villar accordingly notes that cinema "es el sitio donde se expresa, donde se llora, donde se ríe... y los humanos sin sentimientos son solo máquinas... es el espejo posible, es el sitio de pensamiento" (Villar). The testimonios/diarios in Villar's film do not only facilitate a greater understanding between the audience and the protagonists, but also among the students themselves. In one exemplary scene, as a student reads her diario aloud to the class, Darío interrupts her to question a classmate about her story and to make sure he (and all the other students) are listening. Darío explains:

Our aim is to develop in this class a capacity for listening to others, being interested in them. This is a problem in Colombia—we don't listen to each other. That's one of the reasons why this country is so violent. Groups that fight each other think they exchange ideas. They don't—they try to impose their ideas on others. Let's reinforce this concept—respect others, listen to them. (*Diario en Medellín*)

As they read their testimonios aloud in class, the common themes that arise are: absent and/or alcoholic parents, murdered relatives, the difficulty of adjusting to the city, and the hope for a better life in Medellín. Above all else, the students' diarios are testimonios of families marked by displacement.¹ The effects of displacement are candidly presented not only in the students' diarios, but also through several scenes outside of the classroom. At one point in the documentary, for example, three students search for Doralba—a missing classmate whose family has left the comuna without any notice. They track her down and through tears she explains that a couple days ago a man knocked on her family's door and delivered a letter demanding two million pesos.

The letter explained that her family was being watched, and it threatened death if the payment was not made. Doralba infers that the money is wanted for the purchase of weapons and/or drugs. Although her classmates try to comfort her, Doralba and her family are distraught and feel utterly helpless in the face of this impossible demand.

Throughout the film, we also see newly displaced people constructing shacks on the unoccupied periphery of Santo Domingo. Towards the denouement, police with guns and shields forcefully evacuate them and tear down their homes. One man, who is being kicked out and who is crying, says: "The government treats us like dogs, that's what's so painful" (*Diario en Medellín*). Contractors scope the hillside along with people who claim the land, and the shacks are destroyed and burned down. These squatters have fled from the countryside violence and have no place else to go. They protest and put up a fight with police, and at least one man is badly beaten by the authorities.

Diario en Medellín ultimately shows how the displaced often face conditions of extreme violence, poverty, and continued threats (and continued displacement) that often prove to be just as traumatic as the massacres and death threats from which they have fled. Villar accordingly presents the space of the comuna as continually marked by displacement and its traumatic effects. Displacement is thus shown to be an ever-evolving trauma rather than a singular disturbance. The protracted internal armed conflict in Colombia had, in fact, by June 2008 displaced 2,649,139 people according to the government, and 4,361,355 people according to a reliable non-governmental source.² The students' diarios testify to this situation, but they also show the dynamic, seemingly endless difficulties faced by displaced people in the unfamiliar and often inhospitable setting of the comuna.

The difficulties of life in a Medellín comuna are also the focus of *La Sierra*. Filmed in 2003 in a Colombian hillside shantytown, *La Sierra* is a personal examination of three individuals who are intimately connected to their community's brutal turf war. The documentary contains abundant scenes of crossfire and bloodshed while also showing the everyday life that exists alongside persistent conflict. Ultimately, violent young paramilitaries are at once *La Sierra's* compelling focal point and—as described by an elderly man in the beginning of the film—the community's central crisis; he attests: "Son muchachos. Es que estamos en manos de muchachos armados. Eso es todo el problema" (*La Sierra*).

Unlike *Diario en Medellín*, there is little mention in *La Sierra* of the displacement that is intrinsically connected to the growth of comunas as well as to the shantytown turf war. The text at the beginning of the film, however, does tell us that the decades-long bloody civil conflict in Colombia "has slowly moved from the jungles to cities such as Medellín, where urban gangs aligned themselves with leftist guerillas or right-wing paramilitary groups" (*La Sierra*). *La Sierra* ultimately centers on this urban warfare, and it illustrates how a life of violence in the comunas is often the most accessible way for a comuna youth to attain a meaningful social identity (in terms of a decent salary, respect and power). This situation, however, is the manifestation of rural Colombian problems taking a new form in the comunas as a result of the displacement touched upon in *Diario en Medellín*.

There has indeed been a transfer of rural problems to the comunas which can be seen in the recruitment by paramilitary and guerilla groups of comuna youths; these groups use violence and extortion to exert their power over the neighborhoods, and to recruit new members. Dalton, for instance, notes:

What was going on in the neighborhoods [comunas], too, was sort of the same problem as in the countryside. A lot of paramilitary groups coming in and trying to take over territory because it was the last territory outside of their control in Medellín and so they had to go into those neighborhoods. (Dalton)

Ultimately, due to a lack of economic security and educational opportunities for an improved life, youths like those depicted in *La Sierra* are disproportionately at risk for recruitment by guerillas, paramilitaries, and local gangs.

In contrast to Villar's documentary, we get the impression that the adolescents in *La Sierra* (both the name of the comuna and the title of the film) have never encountered someone like Rubén Darío—a teacher, for instance, who begins his classes with exercises to release negative energy and deal with stress, and who even has his students take turns hugging one another in order to foster a positive class environment. For many of his students, this appears to be the only warmth in their daily life. Darío furthermore encourages his students to not let their surroundings dictate the limits on what they can and cannot achieve in life. He tells them: “One can escape a background and overcome it. Complaining all one's life about one's on-goings, home, and neighborhood gets one nowhere. You have to move on and expect nothing from the system” (*Diario en Medellín*).

The nurturing and empowering space of Darío's classroom—the focal point of *Diario en Medellín*—is in direct opposition to the central space of *La Sierra*—the streets of the comuna which are marked by killing and drugs. While violence, gangs, and death are themes in both films, we only *hear* about them in *Diario en Medellín* as compared to graphically *seeing* them in *La Sierra*. In Villar's documentary, we persistently learn about the community's violence through stories told by the protagonists either in school or in their homes; for instance, one adolescent explains how and why she joined a gang—a situation which also elucidates other leitmotifs in *Diario en Medellín* such as domestic abuse, absent parents and even threats by local militiamen. Additionally, in the documentary's final scene, we hear about more comuna violence as a central character explains that thirty people in Santo Domingo have been killed in the past two weeks. The result is that there is a phantasmal, hovering presence of violence that becomes even more pervasive because it is not overtly shown.

In contrast, in *La Sierra* we graphically *see* the violence and drugs (and their effects), but other comuna social problems are never expounded upon to the extent that they are in *Diario en Medellín*. The streets of *La Sierra*—although at times filled with dancing and music—are more commonly presented as dog-eat-dog, and they thus stand out against the sense of solidarity fostered among students in Santo Domingo. Due to the contrasting focal points of these thematically similar films, the protagonists of Villar's documentary seem more innocent, diligent, and determined to rise above their social situation, while in *La Sierra* youths who are roughly the same age come across as

killers and drug addicts with no hope and no way out. When these two documentaries are viewed together, the classroom in *Diario en Medellín* illustrates an example of the encouragement and support that the protagonists in *La Sierra* desperately need. Still, Villar's documentary is not necessarily a warm, sentimental film; the void of commonality (i.e. Darío's guidance) is apparent in that the only space in which these youth can find it is in the school, not at home, church or in their neighborhood, as we are used to infer. Dalton accordingly explains that observing the situation of *La Sierra's* central characters and their lack of opportunities was one of his greatest challenges in making the film:

It was hard just seeing people making really bad decisions. I'm not a father but you can really kind of appreciate that position of seeing someone you really care about getting a really bad idea... But if these people had more opportunities and an education then they could actually do things with their lives... But as long as you have huge parts of the country that the government can't control, there's going to be a wall on the amount of progress made. (Dalton)

The educational resources shown to be lacking in *La Sierra*, coupled with the chosen focus of Dalton and Martínez, result in a documentary in which everything is grittier, starting with the very first scene (even before the title is shown) of an adolescent girl weeping over the fly and bullet ridden corpse of her baby's young father. Two female protagonists—Cielo and Millerlad in *La Sierra* and *Diario en Medellín* respectively—shed light on the situation represented by that opening scene of Dalton and Martínez's film. Both characters are teenage mothers whose boyfriends have been killed in gang-related violence and their individual stories ultimately offer a collective voice of countless other adolescent mothers in the comunas. Villar even describes choosing Millerlad for the documentary because “ella era una evidencia” (Villar). She says that upon meeting Millerlad for the first time, she asked the then 14 year-old girl if she was scared of becoming a mother at such a young age. Millerlad responded with confidence that her child was the seed of somebody who would likely die tomorrow. In view of that, Villar explains the commonness of these girls' situation within the comunas:

El problema principal es la violencia que rodea al colegio, que lo gangrena, que le quita la noción de futuro a todos los muchachos y muchachas que lo hacen, y que de ésta forma les quita también la razón misma de estudiar [y] ellas responden con vida a la muerte que las rodea. (Villar)

In keeping with the tone of the documentary that each protagonist pertains to, Millerlad is an optimistic character as she attempts to overcome her struggles, while Cielo is in some respects hopeless: as she repeats the same mistakes, it seems as though she (and then her child) will continue to be drawn into a life of crime. In *Diario en Medellín*, Millerlad dotes on her child, quizzes her about her father in order to keep his memory alive, and reads loving poems at his grave. She explains that she was in a gang but has since left, reconciled with her mother, and is now dedicated to her studies and child. In the end, Millerlad typifies the fight to distance herself from gang life. In contrast, Cielo functions as a vehicle reflecting another facet of shantytown violence different than that offered by the other two protagonists

(both male paramilitaries): her two and a half year-old son boasts that he will avenge his father's death, and she herself continues to be attracted to paramilitaries (as illustrated by her new relationship with one such male who is in prison). Cielo is also, however, one of the only characters who directly speaks of displacement in *La Sierra*; she recounts how a few years ago her family—who included paramilitary members—received a note from a rival faction saying that they had to leave their home in three days or all of them would be killed. At the time, Cielo was in sixth grade and she never went back to school.

Parallel to the different trajectories and outlooks embodied by Millerlad and Cielo, there is a different tone in these thematically congruent films which is due to several factors: the chosen protagonists, the authorship and involvement of these central characters in film production, and the intended focus of the film on specific aspects of the comuna. With regards to the selected protagonists (students in Santo Domingo versus individuals intimately connected to the shantytown turf war), the value of these subjects lies in what their own lives represent and how this serves the filmmakers' project. Dalton and Martínez, for instance, wanted to focus their documentary on the varying effects of violence on the residents of La Sierra. Their selected protagonists reflect that central theme: Edison, a powerful, charismatic and adored paramilitary leader; Jesús, a drug-addicted paramilitary member who recently lost his left hand when a grenade that he was building exploded; and Cielo, a teenage mother whose boyfriend was killed in the shantytown turf war. Even the extremely religious father of Edison describes how he was in a gang when he was younger.

Although Dalton does not deny the film's intended focus on violence, he is nonetheless surprised by the reactions of community members as well as foreign audiences to this central theme. Residents of La Sierra, for instance, complained that he and Martínez did not "show the good parts of the community" and that they made "it seem like everyone's involved in the fighting" (Dalton). Dalton continues:

They said we don't show the religious side, and you know, not everyone's a paramilitary, there's more hard-working people trying to make a living, and that's something we thought about while we were filming but, you know, it's not *their* story. Hopefully people can assume that just because we're focusing on kids involved in gangs doesn't mean that everybody's involved in gangs. You think it would be a logical deduction... [But] in every film screening that we did, it could be in Miami or New York, we'd always get one person like: "Why you always got to show all the violence?" (Dalton)

For every comment like this one, Dalton says, there were contrasting reactions, specifically from paramilitaries: "In La Sierra we had a big screening in a church and everyone came and one of the paramilitaries came up to me afterwards and said 'it's really good but I thought you were gonna have more action in it.' And I'm just like 'it's not just about shooting people, there's more to it'" (Dalton). The conflicting criticisms of too much versus too little violence, however, reflect how Dalton and Martínez worked to show the humanity and personal life of those connected to

La Sierra's turf war. As Edison says: "Nosotros somos gente también, no sólo máquinas de guerra" (*La Sierra*).

Like Dalton and Martínez, Villar showed her documentary to both local and international audiences with wide-ranging reactions. She says:

La he ido mostrando en sitios muy variados con gente muy distinta y las reacciones son muy distintas... desde la casi rabia por el hecho de que sea eso que yo quiera mostrar "de mi país" en el exterior, es decir una preocupación por la "imagen del país" que pesa más que el fondo... pero también gente muy conmovida, que descubre lo que pasa cerca de sus casas, o gente más militante que se siente mal de que eso siga pasando. (Villar)

Villar says that during the production and screening of the film, she made a conscious decision not to worry about the nationality of the audience and their varied reactions. This was in part due to her feeling that there was already a universal element in the film to which most audiences could relate: "el puente que tenemos en común muchos de los posibles espectadores es el de ir o haber ido al colegio" (Villar). Indeed, the setting of the classroom functions not only as a nurturing place for Darío's students but also as a universal space to most which spectators can relate despite the harsh and likely unfamiliar context in which it is situated. It is in fact the absence of such direct universality, coupled with the graphic violence that—although humanized and personalized—is the focal point of *La Sierra*, which contributes to a tone of otherness rather than solidarity between the central characters and the audience in Dalton and Martínez's film.

Reinforcing the dissimilar tone of these two documentaries is the role that the protagonists had in authorship and production of each film. This involvement is all the more relevant in documentary because, as visual anthropologists Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool observe, the act of representing is in itself a form of domination.³ While in *La Sierra* the central characters did not participate at all in film production, Villar tried to balance the power relations intrinsic to documentary production through her commitment to involving Darío's students in the making of *Diario en Medellín*. She says:

Siempre he pensado que no podemos "pagar" los actores de documental, porque justamente creamos una relación económica en que les podríamos exigir lo que queramos, pues les estamos pagando... ¡la gran libertad que tienen es de irse cuando quieran! Pero al mismo tiempo, sus situaciones económicas eran tales que era muy difícil no ayudarles. Yo decidí crear un taller de video en el colegio, un intercambio: por un lado ellos entendían mejor lo que yo podía hacer con ellos cuando los filmaba" y por otro lado yo les permitía acercarse a un *métier*, un oficio que de pronto les abría otras puertas. (Villar)

Villar also paid some of Darío's students to be her assistants on the film and to help out the production crew. The involvement of the student protagonists in the documentary production is another testimonial heirloom, this time hearkening back to New Latin American Cinema—a movement parallel to testimonio which was similarly concerned with presenting marginal subjects

and social problems (such as those in the comuna). With regards to autism, there was a fundamental emphasis in New Latin American Cinema on the participation of the people as co-auteurs in the production of the film because cinema was believed to be genuine only when the masses created it.⁴ In *Diario en Medellín*, not only do we see the subjects learning about film production, but they also create a testimonial script for the film through their diaries—a tactic which implicates them in authorship of the film.

Even Villar's attitude at the start of making *Diario en Medellín* is reminiscent of New Latin American Cinema filmmakers, who were often involved in politics, focused on choice as a central theme, and who believed that their films contributed to the *concientización*⁵ of the protagonists, filmmakers and audience alike. Most notably, we see the theme of choice in the central protagonists who struggle to rise above the seemingly insurmountable problems of the comuna. Outside of Darío's classroom, for instance, a student named Camilo organizes a raffle in order to raise money for a trip to Rome. Millerlad also struggles throughout the film to distance herself from gang life in order to study and be a good mother—something that she herself lacked while growing up. This focus on choice reflects how at the onset of making the documentary, Villar believed in the ideals embodied by New Latin American Cinema, but through making the film, the *concientización* that took place for her was unforeseen:

Yo creo que cuando lo hice, mi objetivo si tenía algo de militante.... querer cambiar algo, querer participar a cambiar la visión de las cosas... pero en el fondo haciéndolo me di cuenta de que lo más importante que me estaba sucediendo era que yo misma estaba por primera vez entendiendo muchas cosas en carne propia... y que la película me transformó el optimismo en un pesimismo pasajero... Yo creí a todas las historias desde el principio: pensé que el colegio era un sitio de cambio social y de posibilidades de salir de un hueco... al final lo viví como Pigmalion de Bernard Shaw (la protagonista, florista, después de mucho aprender, de salir de su condición, vuelve a ella por algo casi de predestinación social: las sociedades que no permiten el movimiento social nos dan ésta impresión) Creí que Camilo podría hacer su viaje si vendía el loto... no pudo, no consiguió plata. Pensé que Doralba podría instalarse en un nuevo barrio, y la desplazaron de nuevo... En fin, me di cuenta de manera muy concreta que ese círculo de violencia, de guerra, pero sobretodo de injusticia social en Colombia es muy difícil de romper... [y] diez años más tarde la cosa no ha cambiado mucho. (Villar)

The production of *La Sierra* was a learning process for Martínez as well, specifically with regards to the very power relations that Villar tried to balance. While Dalton was very close with the protagonists (often spending his free time during and after the film in La Sierra), Martínez's relationship with them was more uneven. She says that the protagonists never asked for anything back in return during the film's production, but that this in fact changed when the film was released:

Cielo has always felt that she didn't have anything in return... Even though Scott and I have separately given her money, she has always felt, and you know,

this is something about a documentary that I would never do again, it's that Cielo felt that she should have received more maybe. She has received a lot, but little by little. If there had been a payment at the end then maybe she would have felt better... I don't know. She calls me every like three months, and it's a very strange relationship. It's something I wouldn't want to do again like that, like little by little, or maybe like a payment, I don't know. I just think, you know, you don't want to pay them because if you pay them, then their story changes. But if you don't pay them then...it's just a tricky question. (Martínez)

Cielo is not the only protagonist in *La Sierra* to express dissatisfaction upon completion of the film. While Edison was killed during the filming, the third central character, Jesús Martínez, has said:

We liked the film because it showed the reality we were living, but it would be good if someone came to show how we are now. When the gringo came to film us, this zone was the most conflict-ridden of all. What I want to explain is: now we have peace, but they still don't repair the roads or the steps. Look how we are living. Look at this poverty.⁶

Jesús explains that his comuna is still dependent on outsiders for representation—to record their stories and draw attention to their problems. This dependence is in direct opposition to some of Villar's protagonists who thanks to her workshop, are now able to represent themselves. In addition to the workshop that Villar created during the production of *Diario en Medellín*, she explains:

Unos años más tarde creí en Bogotá un taller de cine documental Varan—la escuela de documental con que trabajo en París—e hice venir tres de los muchachos que había conocido en las comunas. Dos de ellos hicieron películas maravillosas que viajaron por festivales y que los hicieron viajar, y hoy en día ambos trabajan por la televisión local de Medellín. (Villar)

In accordance with the absence of subject participation, *La Sierra*'s testimonial ties exist to a much lesser extent than *Diario en Medellín*, but they are present nonetheless. As journalists who both had several years experience working for the Associated Press, Dalton and Martínez were concerned with putting forward a well-rounded piece in which the marginal protagonists of comuna violence could testify for themselves. The contrasting audience criticisms of the film that I have indicated illustrate the fine line that they had to walk between showing the faces of the shantytown turf war without seeming like all they were presenting was gratuitous violence. Dalton explains, for example, that he and Martínez tried to let the protagonists speak for themselves: “the idea of the film was that it was going to be, you know, their own words... just the lives that they wanted to portray and we just try to respect that” (Dalton). At the same time, he says, they tried to avoid exhibitionism in the sense of “[National] Geographic, Discovery Channel, or Animal Planet” as in “look at the young paramilitary guy walking in the street” (Dalton). Such exhibitionism is actually a feature that New Latin American Cinema worked against, along with misunderstood suffering, and Hollywood commercialism and aesthetic.

La Sierra thus maintains a testimonial connection, and the presented violence is often justified by Edison and Jesús' repeated arguments that they are fighting for a cause (saying, for instance, that if the ELN invaded, then a lot of people would be killed and forced to leave the comuna). Nonetheless, the graphic presentation of this violence, coupled with the production methods and authorship of *La Sierra*, contribute to a documentary that at times resembles the aesthetic of a Hollywood action film. Specifically, the fast-paced rhythm and editing and the adrenaline-based aesthetic, in which the scenes of crossfire resemble the per seconds reactions of Hollywood films, are in direct contrast to the precepts of New Latin American Cinema which called for an anti-Hollywood aesthetic that would awaken the spectator. *La Sierra* even maintains its footing in a similar effectiveness as that of North American action movies due to its romantic subplots and tidy ending. At the film's denouement, for instance, we see a disarmament of all the paramilitaries, insinuating that the comuna violence will somehow lessen. But Dalton says that the violence is worse now: "The paramilitaries control every aspect of the barrios in Medellín today. And they're in Cartagena and Bogotá, too. They're everywhere. There are more paramilitaries now than there were before the disarmament" (Dalton).

In contrast, *Diario in Medellín* ends in just the opposite way with news that a wave of people have died and with a group of friends singing a song for one of the deceased. While the audience has ideally connected with the central characters through the solidarity in—and space of—Darío's classroom, we see that the violence and rippling effects of displacement still continue. Hence, whereas *La Sierra* has a violent tone and focus with a resolved ending, *Diario en Medellín* presents a more multifaceted depiction of comuna social problems with a universal element and a disturbing final scene. The solidarity fostered during Villar's film (between the audience and subjects) ideally makes this denouement all the more upsetting. But like the endings common to New Latin American Cinema films (in which a call to action was very common), this shock after solidarity is another call to action, another testimonial tie.

One testimonial element present in both films (and in most documentaries in general) is the language of the central characters which, when viewing *La Sierra* and *Diario en Medellín* together, starkly reflects the diverse comuna population and the wide-ranging social problems within such neighborhoods. In particular, one character elucidates this linguistic testimonial element and the possibility (or lack thereof) of rising above one's social circumstance (as encouraged by Darío). Arguably the most charismatic character in Villar's film, Juan Carlos—an adolescent poet—is first introduced to us in his cluttered, ramshackle home where he explains how difficult it was for him to write the assigned diario. Juan Carlos says that reconstructing his family history was very challenging because his mother talks incomprehensibly, and his diario is thus a mixture of fantasy and reality. He says his poetic language is complex and arcane and hard for her to understand, but he adds: "Anything I achieve I owe to her because though my writing has strayed from her, it's also very close to her. I use her language to describe her because it's very poetic" (*Diario en Medellín*).

Throughout the documentary, many of Juan Carlos' writings (among those of several other students) are read during scenes of daily comuna life. In one such scene we hear: "Life

in the countryside is like a country within a country; there no one seems to dream. They think dreams are as unreal as the dreamers themselves" (*Diario en Medellín*). In addition to the connection here to displacement suffered by those like Juan Carlos' mother, this narration is a reminder, again, of the severely limited options (i.e. even dreaming of—let alone actualizing—another lifestyle) that the protagonists of *La Sierra* seem to have when compared with those of *Diario en Medellín*. When asked if he thinks he will die young, for instance, Jesús of *La Sierra* responds "claro" without hesitation. He goes on to say that, because he and his friends are already too involved in the turf war, he focuses on the present instead of the future, and that his only dream right now is to get to know his unborn child for seven or eight months before dying.

Although there is no narration in *La Sierra*, when it is viewed alongside *Diario en Medellín*, Juan Carlos' poetic writings highlight how the language of both films is a stirring testimony itself that bears witness to the diverse comuna population (i.e. the language of Juan Carlos' mother which reflects the trauma of displacement, the narration of Juan Carlos who represents the educated youth, and the drugged up, slang-filled speech of Jesús in *La Sierra* who offers a collective voice for the shantytown paramilitaries as well as those under the influence of the community's drug business).

Juan Carlos dreams of writing like Tolstoy, and the (educational) opportunities he has a result of his parents' relocation to Santo Domingo hint that he just might be able to achieve that dream. He narrates: "I am the scribe of my parents' lives. I open doors that have padlocked imagination" (*Diario en Medellín*). Juan Carlos seems to be able to envisage a life that his parents never could have. Villar, however, reveals what became of that dream; she says: "Y la historia más triste es que a Juan Carlos, 'el poeta'... lo mataron hace ya como seis años" (Villar). Ultimately, despite the different language, focal points, and tones of *La Sierra* and *Diario en Medellín*, death remains a tragic commonality among all the central characters.

In the end, the social problems within the comunas warrant attention in the very words of those suffering most, i.e. in the testimonies of shantytown residents—be it the displaced, paramilitaries, or students. The urgency at the core of these films is that of the present-day metropolis and its peripheral, marginalized communities. This exigency is not born from the dictatorships and oppression that birthed testimonio and New Latin American Cinema, but rather from present-day displacement, economic issues, public policy, and civil conflict. *Diario en Medellín* and *La Sierra* contribute to conscious-raising of shantytown social problems in order to create concientización among the audience—be it a local or international public. Despite different styles and production methods, there is great value in both filmic representations of the comuna. Villar for example says: "Pienso que es en la variedad de historias, de géneros, de miradas que 'el puzzle' del país puede recomponerse" (Villar). Together, it is these different pieces of the puzzle that *La Sierra* and *Diario en Medellín* ultimately offer us.

Notes

¹ In Colombia, the recent history of displacement can be traced back to La Violencia—the period of civil conflict (between 1948 and 1958) in various rural areas between liberals and conservatives. During this time, over 2 million people were displaced by violent political confrontations between these two parties. Since La Violencia, struggles for political power, land disputes, and drug trafficking have all found expression in armed conflict and the result has been forced displacement. In particular, guerilla groups such as FARC and the ELN, as well as the paramilitaries, have largely contributed to displacement through threats and violence.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. “Colombia: Rate of new displacement highest in two decades.” 2008. 22 Dec. 2009. <[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/MCOT-7KHFVV-full_report.pdf/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/MCOT-7KHFVV-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf)>

³ Lutkehaus, Nancy and Jenny Cool. “Paradigms Lost and Found: The ‘Crisis of Representation’ and Visual Anthropology.” *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 116.

⁴ Often in New Latin American Cinema films, the mode of production was characterized by the subjects of the film—“the people”—being inherently involved (i.e. sometimes the subjects were co-directors and co-editors, and these subjects often acted in the film in roles—a-la-neo-realism—based on themselves).

⁵ As Michael Chanan notes in *Cuban Cinema* (2004), Brazilian pedagogist Paulo Freire believed that concientización was a process through which individuals could come to shape their own destiny, and it was also a means to break “the culture of silence” to which underdevelopment condemned the subaltern classes. By putting cinema at the service of social groups which lack access to the means of communication, their point of view is consequently made public and concientización can take place (Chanan 169).

⁶ Bristow, Matthew. “Documentary on La Sierra shows its real essence.” *Latin American Herald Tribune*. lath.com 23 Dec. 2009 <<http://www.laht.com/article.asp?CategoryId=12393&ArticleId=215160>>

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