



DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND PUBLIC POLICY

Narcoculture in Colombian Media: The Case of Jhon Jairo Velasquez
Vasquez – El Popeye

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To my advisor Marcelo Moriconi, my parents and Christopher Wade Rosario.

ABSTRACT

Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez alias el Popeye, an ex-sicario and the last remaining member of the Medellin cartel, has been chosen as the object of study and he launched his own narconovela *Alias JJ – Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar* (2017), which became popular in Colombia and across the world and is analyzed in this research to determine how narcoculture ideals are spread by Popeye to wider audiences. The purpose of this research is to determine how Jhon Jairo, as a narco-figure, fits into the concept of narcoculture in Colombian media and whether he, as a figure, is the cause or the result of narcoculture, or both.

Through the research and data gathered from academic works, polls, documentaries, narconovelas and interviews, El Popeye's popularity is analyzed in order to determine why icons of narcoculture like himself are being followed and admired by large audiences in Colombia. It was concluded that although Jhon Jairo is a medium of narcoculture and uses media attention to spread his ideals, he is not the only to blame as without support, interest and fascination from the audiences, his narcoculture ideals would not gain any media attention. This study offers a rather unique approach as large amounts of research on narcoculture are based on deceased drug lords or those serving life sentences in prison, while Jhon Jairo, the last high-ranked member of the Medellin Cartel has recently been released after serving his sentence and still lives to tell his tales and spread his ideals, unlike Pablo Escobar who was killed at the end of his criminal career. In addition to that, this research also establishes that narcoculture ideals and its icons usually thrive in environments which are predominantly linked to poverty, social inequality, and lack of social mobility, in other words, societies where wealth is seen as a symbol of social status and a means to power and dominance.

KEYWORDS

Narcoculture; Colombia; Drug Cartels; Colombian Media; Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez; Narconovela; Telenovela

RESUMO

Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez, conhecido como Popeye, um ex-sicário e o último membro remanescente do cartel de Medellín, foi escolhido como objeto de estudo e lançou a sua própria narconovela *Alias JJ - Sobrevivendo um Pablo Escobar* (2017), que se tornou popular na Colômbia e em todo o mundo e é analisado nesta pesquisa para determinar como os ideais da narcocultura são difundidos pelo Popeye para um público mais amplo. O objetivo desta pesquisa é determinar como Jhon Jairo, como um narcotraficante, se encaixa no conceito de narcocultura na mídia colombiana e se ele, como figura, é a causa ou o resultado da narcocultura, ou ambos.

Por meio de pesquisas e dados coletados de trabalhos acadêmicos, pesquisas, documentários, narconovelas e entrevistas, a popularidade de El Popeye é analisada para determinar por que os ícones de narcocultura como ele estão a ser seguidos e admirados por grandes audiências na Colômbia. Concluiu-se que embora Jhon Jairo seja um médium da narcocultura e use a atenção da mídia para difundir os seus ideais, ele não é o único culpado porque sem apoio, interesse e fascínio do público, os seus ideais de narcocultura não conseguiam obter atenção da mídia. Este estudo oferece uma abordagem bastante única, uma vez que as grandes pesquisas sobre narcocultura são baseadas em traficantes falecidos ou condenados à prisão perpétua, enquanto Jhon Jairo, o último membro importante do Cartel de Medellín, foi libertado recentemente após cumprir a pena. e ainda vive para contar os seus contos e espalhar os seus ideais, ao contrário de Pablo Escobar, que foi morto no final de sua carreira criminosa. Além disso, esta pesquisa também estabelece que os ideais de narcocultura e seus ícones geralmente prosperam em ambientes predominantemente ligados à pobreza, desigualdade social e falta de mobilidade social, ou seja, sociedades onde a riqueza é vista como um símbolo de estatuto social. e um meio para exercer poder e dominar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Narcocultura; Colômbia; Cartéis de Drogas; Media Colombiano; Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez; Narconovela; Telenovela

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INTRODUCTION

Narcoculture in Colombian media is predominantly tied to the illegal drug trafficking problem and the dark era of the 1980s and 1990s, brought on by Pablo Escobar and other major cartel leaders. Although drug trafficking and a culture of violence and illegality already existed in Colombia before the Medellin and the Cali Cartels, Pablo Escobar gave origin to a contemporary narco-empire, one that would shape Colombia as well as Latin America in the years to come, not just socially and politically but also culturally. Colombia was struggling with illegal drug trade, high levels of violence, terrorism, corruption within political parties and governmental institutions, armed groups with the intention of taking over the country, and the Colombian people, especially those that belonged to the marginalized social classes, were constantly living in fear.

Social inequality and political elitism were something that Colombia was struggling with long before the rise of the cartels, but external factors have contributed to marginalization getting out of control in the 1980s and the 1990s. U.S president Richard Nixon declared drugs and drug abuse a public enemy, after which a campaign was launched with the goal to eradicate suppliers and manufacturers of illegal recreational drugs. Colombia was particularly affected by this policy as a significant number of drugs was being manufactured there and sold in the United States and Europe. However, the campaign proved to be quite unsuccessful because the root of the issue was not the manufacture of illegal drugs, but that there was a large demand in the U.S and Europe, and as long as that demand existed, there would always be a supply. Cartels and narco kingpins took advantage of this demand and the fact that Colombia was suffering from social inequality to promote their own agenda, which was to consolidate their own power by initially appealing to the marginalized classes.

Such was the case of Pablo Escobar, the leader of the Medellin Cartel, who also became known as the Colombian Robin Hood. Pablo Escobar, although one of the most brutal cartel leaders, was

surprisingly supported by a lot of people in his hometown, Medellin, because of how generous he was with the poor and his numerous contributions to improve the city's facilities and infrastructure. To Colombia's society and government, he was one of the most hated men in the country, but to many others he was a hero. He was idealized by many and some even thought of him as a god. To this day, there are songs about him, movies, telenovelas and even clothes that mimic his fashion style. The idealization of the narco-world was on the rise with Pablo Escobar, and joining a cartel was even considered a symbol of social status by some. Such is the case of Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vazquez, also known as Alias Popeye/ Alias JJ, who was a sicario that was a part of Pablo Escobar's inner circle and he is the only man left from that circle to tell his story. However, he walks freely through the streets of Medellin where he signs autographs and often gives interviews. After having served 23 years in prison for over 250 murders and being indirectly responsible for approximately 3,000 deaths (Alexander: 2014), one of Colombia's most controversial hitmen was set free and became a Youtube, Twitter and telenovela star with thousands of followers and subscribers.

In order to understand why Jhon Jairo Velasquez "El Popeye" has become so popular and even admired by some, one must first understand one of the biggest subcultures related to drug trafficking and organized crime: Narcoculture. With the rise of Pablo Escobar and the Medellin Cartel, the culture of violence, excessive spending of illegally earned money, as well as proving social status through power and flashy items, hit its peak on the streets of Medellin and slowly started spreading to other cities, until finally spreading to very large parts of the country. As narcoculture and the idealization of narco-lifestyle penetrated the very essence of society and even politics, it slowly started gaining an important place in the cultural and entertainment industry.

Despite the fact that the most powerful cartels were dismantled almost two decades ago, there is still a very strong presence of narcoculture in the media, as narconovelas are becoming almost as popular as the traditional telenovelas. Although Pablo Escobar died in 1993, the aftermath of his cartel and his figure still live on in the media, and are of great interest to the public, which can be seen by how much interest and support Jhon Jairo Velasquez's narconovela has attracted. Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez, although no longer an active participant in the criminal world, is the last remaining high-ranking member of the Medellin Cartel, and continues to embody the original

values of narcoculture, the culture that dominated the streets of Medellin in the 1980s and 1990s and still lives on to this very day in parts of Colombia and other Latin American countries.

1. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The objectives of this research are to analyze and understand how the narcoculture phenomenon has affected Colombian cultural industries and how it is portrayed primarily in popular media. The cultural industry of narconovelas and their consumption, is a very important factor that should be analyzed together with definitions of narcoculture and how Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez incorporates the ideals of that culture, in order to be able to research and study this socio-cultural phenomenon. Since narcoculture has become widely spread and even given origins to subcultures, the most famous cultural industries such as telenovelas, documentaries and interviews will be analyzed in order to understand the perception of narco-figures, as well as how this media portrays them and how they portray themselves to the media.

The object of study in this research will be a narco-figure, Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez, also known as El Popeye, who is both an actor and a narco-figure, and uses popular media channels such as narconovelas, social media and literature to give insights into the narco-world and its ideologies. This then leads to the following research question, and the main objective of this investigation:

Could a figure like Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez alias El Popeye be considered a personification of narcoculture in Colombian popular media?

The hypothesis is that Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez is indirectly both a consequence of narcoculture and a cause of narcoculture, as by being a symbol and a narco-figure, he uses his fame to further spread narco-mentality through Colombian media.

Narconovelas, like other popular media and TV shows, serve to be consumed by large audiences, and when they go viral, they tend to give the audience a new perspective of the narco-world. The flashy nature of the narco-world, and the characters portrayed by the actors, often lead to an idealization of the characters, as well as the actors. For this reason, narconovelas can be seen as a tool which helps channel and multiply the narcoculture ideals, as well as popularize historical

narco-figures and the actors that portray them. Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez appears precisely in this context, as an actor and as a historical narco-figure himself, and reproduces as well as represents narcoculture, a culture which has been a base for his beliefs, as well as his criminal career. The hypothesis of this research is that Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez is indeed a personification of narcoculture, since if narco-ideals were not already present in the Colombian society, he would not be able to achieve the fame and the media attention that he is getting.

2. STATE OF THE ART AND METHODOLOGY

The boom and consolidation of narcoculture is a part of a process of re-invention of social norms and rules. This process includes the loss of trust in political institutions, changes in the parameters of legality (Moriconi: 2017), a fusion of the state and crime which create a fine and confusing line between legality and illegality. Recently, the state logically appeared to be linked to legality and order while crime was its natural enemy, linked to negativity and chaos (Moriconi: 2017). Nowadays, some social sciences and criminology (Moriconi 2017; Schultze-Kraft 2016, 2017; Dewey et. al. 2017) show that what were once seen as opposing ends of the spectrum, the state and crime interact and coexist rather frequently. The dichotomy between the legal and illegal no longer applies in a lot of cases.

Organized crime and white-collar crime are very deeply embedded in the functioning and sustainability of economic groups and banks, and not only of those located in the fiscal paradises. Some of the most profitable activities on this planet are linked to illegal markets dominated by organized crime, some of the most popular examples being arms, drugs and human trafficking. These criminal activities make up of around 20% of world trade (Dufour 2013: 22; Naím 2007). At the same time, the financial elites promote predatory behaviors and strengthen economic activities that are borderline immoral and criminal. As Dufour explains (2013: 23), the distinction between organized crime and illegal markets has become unsustainable because “the official economic activity” has provided a “mass of capital of suspicious origin, possibly from money laundering”. This “corrupt” capital originates from legitimate activities and rather common ones at large corporations, which are often characterized by predatory behavior, similar to that of the mafia and cartels (Moriconi: 2018).

Public recognition of the existence of corrupt behavior among the political and financial elites is what socially predisposes tolerance towards crime and transgression, and at the same time creates a solid base for subcultures such as narcoculture. The good policemen and detectives are no longer seen as the protagonists of popular tales, while the immoral and corrupt characters, whether politicians (House of Cards), cartel leaders (Narcos) or sicarios (Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar, Alias JJ) are instead seen as the heroes.

Moriconi (2018) warns that in a situation where illegality and legality are intertwined and where the elites are permanently involved in illegal behavior, the need to permanently resort to the decriminalization of crimes is constant. A clear example is shown by the naturalization of tax amnesties, which are recommended by international institutions (World Bank, OECD, IDB, among others) and are recurrently promoted by governments around the world. There are illegal riches that deserve to be legitimized, while there are others that do not.

The biggest problem with these measures is not the injustice of forgiving evasions that, when condoned, delegitimize and even ridicule all those who paid their taxes, but in fact that they modify the spirit of legality and the justice system. The argument, based on the logic of the market, is that it is better to give the evaders a legal and appealing possibility for black money to enter the legal market. This, however, squanders the logic of materialization of legality. It is recognized that there is a crime (evasion, the existence of money in black), which is recognized by legal frameworks (where punishments are stipulated), but instead of activating all judicial measures to prevent it, prosecute it and condemn it, political institutions (due to negligence or interest) recognize that the implementation of these mechanisms is not effective or useful, so, as it is impossible to reinforce legality following the stipulations of "the law", institutions fail to prosecute crime and instead create appealing incentives for criminals.

In an era marked by hyper-individualism (Dufour 2009, Lipovetsky 1983); moral blindness, through which appear acts or types of people that do not comply with moral obligations and evaluations (Bauman and Donskis 2013; Cortina 2013); the "post-truth" and the lack of trust in democratic institutions (Latinobarómetro 2017: 21), the delegitimization of legality generates power vacuums that have expanded to all social levels and dematerialize hierarchies. We are facing a problem of means and ends. And this is what even today confuses political science, a confusion that the study of crime begins to bring to light.

Narcoculture is the resignification of means and forms that were previously considered to be immoral and politically incorrect, and that emerge with new meanings due to their effectiveness in achieving ends that, by the ways of legality, seem to be impossible. As Moriconi states (2017, 2018) transgression is no longer a deviation, but the norm, and this is due to its effectiveness as a means to acquire ends. The model of life promulgated by formal institutions has ceased to be credible for the realization of social success (Moriconi 2011). Citizens learn ideas about social success that, later, society itself is responsible for denying or making impossible. On the road to success, legality, as a means, appears as an obstacle.

In this framework, the study of illegal markets, and their economic logic, has demonstrated the incentives behind these types of transgressions. Illegal markets generate jobs that, despite their informality or, sometimes, illegality, provide their employees with a salary, possibility of consumption and, in many cases, satisfactory future expectations due to the possibility of achieving social mobility. At the same time, as Dewey (2015) explains, these markets, through the participation of political leaders or security forces, generate abundant resources for institutional financing and the supporters, in order to organize or order territorial coexistence, to generate political support, and to maintain power, or at least calm, potentially conflicting sectors. This ends up protecting the elites and generating wealth, while perpetuating the exclusion of social groups that find themselves in an evil circle from which they hardly find a way out. However, it is in this dependency that means are produced to generate feelings of hope in the future and a better life. In some cases, as we have shown in previous work, the leaders of the highest hierarchy of the illegal market provide, in addition to material resources and hope, feelings of security from providing protection and a system of parallel justice in which, those who do not respect the informal rules of hierarchical coexistence, are punished; a punishment that can include murder or lynching.

In order to establish how Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez “El Popeye” acts as a personification of narcoculture in Colombian media, this research is conducted on the basis of scientific articles, books, interviews with Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez, documentaries, telenovelas and narconovelas as the most widespread media and cultural industry in Colombia. However, to be able to reach a conclusion, a comparison will be made between the definitions and characteristics of narcoculture with Jhon Jairo’s criminal history, personality and mindset. When defining narcoculture and its most common traits, scientific articles and books published by various

authors, some of them being Omar Rincon, Gunther Maihold and Alex Schlenker will be used to debate and establish a definition of what it means to be a narco.

After defining and understanding narcoculture as a growing subculture and a mentality, an analysis of Jhon Jairo's narconovela and its significance to narcoculture, as well as an interview by Jhonny Valle will be analyzed to see how Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez englobes the principles of narcoculture and how he transmits them through media.

Narcoculture is a contemporary subculture that initially started spreading as a result of drug cartels and violence. Essentially, Rincon, Maihold and Schlenker agree that that it is a culture based on fast money, excessive consumerism, violence as a demonstration of power and a culture where to be feared means to be respected. Slowly this culture started spreading throughout the streets in Colombia until it also started playing a significant role in the media According to Omar Rincon (2013: 3), to be a narco has to do with aesthetics, a mentality in which fast success and power are the ultimate goal, extravagant taste and excessive financial spending, in other words, a culture of ostentation which justifies any means to escape poverty and establish dominance through money and violence. In addition to that, Maihold (2012: 65) further characterizes narcoculture by stating that it fits with the idea of postmodernism, as it is about living in the moment and not focusing too much on the long-term, excessively consuming as a part of participating in the society and it is a product of modern capitalism.

Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez is an example of a person that is the result of narcoculture as he started his criminal career at the peak of the cartels, but at the same time, he also acts as a medium which transmits the values of narcoculture, indirectly causing this subculture to spread to an even wider audience. Research so far that has focused on analyzing narco-figures in Colombia has usually been based on extremely popular narco-bosses like Pablo Escobar or the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers, and not many stories of sicarios or lower ranked cartel members have been taken into account when analyzing the rising phenomenon of narcoculture in the media.

The reason that Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez has been chosen as the object of study for this research is precisely because of that. In order to really understand narcoculture in the media and what attracts the audience to this concept, it is also important to analyze figures such as Popeye, who started off as regular "workers" for the cartel, without many benefits or fame at the beginning.

Another reason why Jhon Jairo was chosen for this research is because he is the last remaining member of the Medellin Cartel and he still lives to tell his story after having served more than 20 years in prison. Although El Popeye is just a narco-figure like many others, what is interesting is that despite being a criminal and a hitman, he is still admired by and followed by many people, as can be concluded from his narconovelas, books and Youtube account with more than half a million followers. The essence and the penetration of narcoculture in the society can really be seen when analyzing Jhon Jairo, and superficially it would seem like he is the central issue, however, the issue is that narcoculture and its ideals have become so engrained in the Colombian society that a large number of ordinary people have been so affected by it that they give attention to and follow figures like Jhon Jairo despite their violent criminal career.

The idea behind narcoculture is not just to become a narco, but also to get social recognition and acceptance from those that do not take part in the narco-world. For example, young men and women in Colombia who watch narconovelas and dream of a luxurious life where they could own everything that the narcos own and establish their dominance through violent or financial means. Although they are not actively participating in the narco-world, these people indirectly support narcoculture and its ideals by giving social acceptance to narco-figures like Jhon Jairo, by following him on social media and giving him compliments, seeing his violent crimes as accomplishments rather than atrocities, and actively idealizing cartels, as if it were something honorable to be a cartel member.

Research so far has been focusing mostly on narco-bosses but another limitation of that is that most are deceased or serving life long sentences in US prisons and their voices are unheard since they do not actively participate in the media, while Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez has lived to see the end of his sentence and is currently adjusting and reintegrating into the society. A combination of all these factors, as well as the fact that he is trying to express his opinion and mindset through his books, narconovelas and video blog, make Popeye a thought-provoking figure that can surely help researchers understand narcoculture as a whole.

As Lester states, the understanding and study of images does not only depend on analyzing the image content literally, but also considering the perspectives through which the image can be analyzed. The different perspectives can be historical, cultural, ethical, personal, critical and technical (Lester: 2006:6). For certain media to appeal to a certain audience, there must be a

number of common ground factors that would guarantee successful communication. Those factors could be a common language that all audience understands, the topic has to be something the audience finds interesting, and it has to be contextualized so that the viewers would understand and be able to interpret based on their cultural, personal, critical or social perspective. For this reason, narconovelas such as *Alias JJ- Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar* (2017) are experiencing so much success in Colombia, as many can perfectly relate to the socio-political context of narcoculture and gang violence, which is present in a lot of marginalized neighborhoods in Colombia.

According to Produ News (2017) and Ibope (2017), the premiere of *Alias JJ- Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar* scored 8.4 rating points and was the most watched program in Colombia on the 8th of February 2017. In addition to that, some of Popeye's most played videos on Youtube have over 800,000 views and his tweets have been shared thousands of times, and although the number of his followers is growing by day, it is estimated that more than half a million people follow him on Youtube and other social media channels. In 2015, Popeye published a book about his criminal career as well as his time in prison, which according to *Semana* (2016) sold over 130,000 copies and can be found on numerous online stores that ship not only within Colombia and Latin America, but also the United States and parts of Europe, mainly the UK, Spain and Germany among others.

The objective of this research is precisely to define, analyze and establish the concepts of narcoculture and how Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez, as a narco-figure, is perceived by the audience and their reactions, as well as how and why the viewers give him so much media attention and praise him despite knowing all about his criminal career.

3. NARCOCULTURE IN COLOMBIAN MEDIA

Producing narconovelas and narco-related content is one of the most successful media businesses in Colombia at the time being. A great example of this is the case of Gustavo Bolivar, the elected senator for the time period of 2018-2022, journalist and the author of the narconovelas *Sin Tetas No Hay Paraiso*, *El Capo* and *Tres Caines*. Gallo (2013) analyzes the fame and the riches that Gustavo Bolivar earned from these narconovelas, concluding that producing narco-related content can make people millionaires due to such interest and demand from the audience. Narconovelas provide insight into a world full of glamor and luxury, and easily spark interest, especially in the younger generations, which were brought up with rather modern and capitalist values. A drug lord

usually has more money than he could ever spend, from which the culture of excessive consumption and flashy social status symbols emerges and becomes one of the common traits of narcoculture.

Narcoculture could be considered a culture of ostentation (Rincon 2013: 3), a culture in which any act is acceptable as long as it means getting out of poverty and that a culture in which being rich and exhibiting it through assets, weapons, money and power is the greatest achievement of all. Narcoculture is also a culture of the nouveau riche whose goal is to consume as much as possible, be above the law and impose their own rules of justice and honor. Omar Rincon also argues that narcoculture is a product of modern capitalism because it is characterized by excessive consumption, living in the moment and not worrying about the future, and believing that excessive spending will lead to financial freedom. He then further continues to argue that the complexity of narcoculture is not only focused on money and power over others, but also focused on returning to Colombian trends and not aspiring towards Europe or the United States.

The bourgeoisie in Colombia generally strives towards European art, literature and even fashion, while the narco is about following local popular culture and imposing its own trends. For example, while a traditional upper-class person might prefer to listen to opera, a narco-nouveau riche is a lot more likely to listen to narcocorridos and wear narco-inspired clothing, as the nouveau riche lives in a culture that is a manifestation of narcoculture. To be recognized and defined as a culture, a movement or a trend must first gain a considerable number of followers. In order to gain more followers, this trend must have a way to reach a larger audience.

Narcoculture, following this example, has also come to have its own vocabulary and methods of communication through which it is spread, which is one of the reasons why it is acceptable to call it and define it as a culture (Maihold 2012: 65). For example, some of the most common methods of transmission of narcoculture are narconovelas, narcocorridos, narco-clothes and fashion, narco-style jewelry, weapons and even religion.

Despite the fact that cartels caused so much damage to Colombia, the idea of being wealthy, powerful and feared started appealing to a lot of people. The concepts of narcoculture and the “narco world”, which were initially associated with cartels and organized crime quickly spread to the everyday life in Colombia. Initially the narco lifestyle was something that only the poor and

the uneducated were aspiring towards (Rincon 2013:1) but it eventually started spreading until it became a deeply engrained part of Colombian culture.

The idealization of narcoculture and lavish lifestyles soon became very prevalent and talked about in Colombian media such as telenovelas, newspapers, movies and music. Omar Rincon also argues that the phenomenon of narcoculture, which started taking over the culture and media in Colombia, quickly started spreading to other Latin American countries like Mexico and Brazil, where it also became an everyday reality. The concept of “colombianization”, as argued by Rincon, meant that Colombian narcoculture was transcending and spreading beyond its borders as if it were an export and establishing itself in previously non-narco territories. Considering the fact that cartel violence had become so widespread that it became a part of people’s everyday lives, it was constantly talked about and with that came new vocabulary to describe the phenomena. For example, concepts which did not exist or were barely heard of before like narcoaesthetics, narconovelas, narcoreligion and narcoculture, all of a sudden became a part of journalist discourse.

Narcoculture became an anthropological phenomenon in Colombia and this glamorized view of drug trafficking and organized crime had infiltrated the society so deeply that even female beauty ideals were affected, and women started having plastic surgeries to achieve the voluptuous “narco look” that was preferred by the drug traffickers. The role of women in narcoculture is largely based on male chauvinism and objectification (Maihold 2012: 65), in the sense that women are often viewed as a symbol of power and money for the drug lord. Narco-bosses, also known as capos, always appear with sensual, desirable and beautiful women as a sign of power and riches.

Women in narcoculture are generally superficial because financial power and vanity are their ultimate goals, while the drug lords are simply a tool they use to reach those goals. The concept of romance in narcoculture is no longer based on kindness and unconditional love, it is rather a union of two people out of common superficial interest. Both parties strive towards excessive display of riches and social status so the narcos look for women, typically beauty pageants, that they can show off with in public, and women get plastic surgeries in order to look more desirable and attract a narco that will provide for them financially. However, there are still other role that women can play in this sub-culture. The role of a mother remains sacred in narcoculture,

especially in Medellin, where it is commonly said “madre solo hay una, padre puede ser cualquier hijo de puta” (Rincon 2012: 4), which approximately translates to that any man can father a child, but it takes a mother to raise one. Another role of women in narcoculture, although a lot less frequent than the previous, is the role of a narco-boss, also known as “La Jefa”. In the previous cases, women had a secondary role which revolved around the narco-boss, but in some cases women too can become cartel leaders. One of the most famous cases of female narco-bosses is Griselda Blanco, who remains as one of the most notorious women in Colombia’s history to this very day.

Telenovelas, known as the Latin American version of soap operas, were particularly affected by the growing narcoculture. Until the late 1980s, the main telenovela themes were romance, overcoming poverty and social injustice, colonialism and post-colonial issues in Colombia and family dramas. However, with the rise of the cartels and the growing violence, the themes quickly adapted to the new issues that Colombia was facing. The Colombian telenovela industry started slowly moving away from the traditional and typical telenovelas such as *Pasion de Gavilanes* (2003), *La Tormenta* (2005), *La mujer en el espejo* (1997), *Yo Soy Betty la Fea* (1999) and *Guajira* (1996), all of which were exceptionally popular. These telenovelas were not only watched in Colombia and other Latin American countries, but also in parts of Eastern Europe, Turkey, the Middle East and Asia.

During the 1990s, Latin American telenovelas, primarily from Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela, became a social phenomenon in Serbia. It is estimated that approximately 3 million Serbs watched telenovelas during this time period, which is around 40% of Serbia’s current population (Zimonjic: 2004). Considering the fact that there is no particular connection between Serbia and Latin America, many wondered why these telenovelas were so popular in Serbia and other countries where they were broadcasted. Surveys which were carried out helped establish that it was because of the traditional telenovela themes such as family values, showing deep emotions and the happy endings in which the good always prevailed and the evil characters were punished.

The interest in learning Spanish skyrocketed in the countries where Latin American telenovelas were broadcasted, and instead of associating Colombia with drug trafficking like Western Europe and USA, Eastern Europe, which was exposed to numerous telenovelas, associated

Colombia with interesting TV Shows, Music, a rich culture and a country with a lot of history and struggles. However, the Colombian telenovela industry started heading in another direction, despite the international success that traditional telenovelas have had in Colombia and the rest of the world. In order to understand why this shift in the telenovela industry is so significant, one must first understand the importance of telenovelas in Colombia, and generally Latin America.

The telenovela is the most important cultural industry of Latin America (Rincon: 2017: 3) and is not just a form of entertainment, but a way to transmit a sense of belonging, stories, moral lessons and everyday problems that torment the society. Telenovelas are particularly popular among the common folk, especially those that have been rejected by the elite culture, and the main themes are often about how working-class communities achieve social mobility through hard work, honest behavior and overcoming obstacles to find true love. Omar Rincon further explains that one of the reasons for Telenovelas' success in Latin America is because they are very easy to watch and easy to understand regardless of social class, education level or even age.

Challenges and societal issues like sexual harassment, poverty, the belief in destiny as an inevitable determinant of the future, sexism and poverty are especially common in the less developed parts of Colombia and the rest of Latin America, which is why the lower social classes can empathize and relate to these topics in telenovelas. Although telenovelas usually tell the story of a selected number of characters, they are directed towards the audience so that the audience would recognize themselves or people alike in that story. The audience in this case is usually the majority of the population and the issues that they face in telenovelas are issues or challenges that an everyday person faces.

The challenges a society faces change over time, and an interesting observation is that the telenovela industry adjusts its themes according to these changes. An example given by Omar Rincon is how in Colombia, the very first telenovelas like *Caballo Viejo* were about rediscovering Caribbean roots and culture, which then developed into telenovelas about rural Colombia, followed by telenovelas that deal with modern social issues and appearances like *Betty la Fea*, and finally the aftermath of cartels and narcoculture started dominating Colombian telenovelas as can be seen in *Alias JJ – Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar* (2017). The telenovela industry adjusts and adapts to the problems that society is facing, and the fact that Colombia's telenovela industry changed so much in a span of less than 20 years just shows how great the

impact of the cartels and organized crime was on the country. The industry changed so much that during the late 1990s and very early 2000s, a new sub-genre of telenovelas emerged:

Narconovelas.

Narconovelas, an action/crime telenovela genre that mostly focuses on the aspects of narcoculture and gang violence, started becoming extremely popular in Colombia and the rest of Latin America around the early 2000s. Narconovelas are a telenovela sub-genre, in the sense that they tell a story about a community or individuals dealing with everyday problems just like traditional telenovelas, except the main focus of these problems is drug and crime related. Although primarily a crime/action genre, narconovelas still englobe the original telenovela themes such as family issues, love and overcoming poverty. The only difference is that in these shows, poverty is usually overcome through illicit means and violence, families are torn apart by crime and the representation of romance is also affected by narco-values. Excessive plastic surgeries, prostitution, trophy wives and promiscuous behavior are some of the most common narconovela characteristics when it comes to romance.

The violent reality from the streets was transformed into cinema and soon replaced the traditional family telenovelas that were often watched by the whole family during dinner time. Telenovelas like *Sin Tetas No hay Paraiso* (2006), *La Reina Del Sur* (2011), *Las muñecas de la mafia* (2009), *El Capo* (2009), *El Cartel de los Sapos* (2008), *El Señor de los Cielos* (2013) and *Alias J.J – Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar* (2017) soon became the face of the new Colombian Telenovela industry, as the traditional telenovelas are less and less popular at the present time. Movies such as *María, llena eres de gracia* (2004) that purely focus on the risks of drug trafficking have become one of Colombia's biggest media exports. As the face of the Colombian Telenovela industry was slowly changing, a new subgenre emerged which slowly started taking over the entertainment industry: Narconovelas.

Ruiz (2016: 11), analyzes the narconovela trends and determines that since 2006, out of the 15 most popular and most viewed TV series in Colombia, 6 are narconovelas. Narconovelas like *Sin Tetas No Hay Paraiso* and the ones mentioned above, went viral in Colombia but have also achieved great fame and success in other Latin American countries, as well as Europe. *Narcos* (2015), which is a US produced crime drama series is an essential example of how narconovelas have influenced the international TV show market beyond Latin America. On IMDB, the series

is presently rated 8.9 out of possible 10 points and has been rated by around 300,000 people from all over the world.

Narcos is a series which tells the story of the main Colombian cartels from the 1980s and onwards, starting with the Medellin Cartel, the Cali Cartel and even scratching the surface of Mexico's issues with drug trafficking. Similar to Colombian narconovelas, the main characters in Narcos are capos (cartel leaders), mafia wives and girlfriends, sicarios (hitmen), police and the Drug Enforcement Administration agents (DEA). Although Narcos is based on a true story, like most narconovelas, it is loosely adapted and highly dramatized. The stories of the Medellin Cartel and Cali Cartel are real, in the sense that these cartels historically existed and caused so much damage to Colombia, but the TV show is directed in a way that almost makes the cartel leaders protagonists.

The stories are told from a perspective in which the cartel leaders are the main focus and the viewers get to see things from their perspectives. Although their actions are not directly or intentionally justified in Narcos (2015) and other narconovelas, one could argue that these shows send subliminal messages to the audience. Since the stories are told in a way that makes the cartel leaders the main focus, the viewers follow the characters' development throughout the show, try to understand their logic and mindset and eventually start empathizing with them. For example, most Europeans and North Americans knew of Pablo Escobar's existence long before Narcos (2015), and he was remembered as a notorious killer, cartel leader and psychopathic criminal.

The general opinion on Pablo Escobar has remained the same in Europe and North America but his image has turned into a narco-icon. Suddenly, movies about the Medellin Cartel are becoming more popular, tourists are going to Colombia from across the world to visit Pablo Escobar's grave, the remains of his self-made prison "La Catedral" and the street graffiti made in his honor. Booking a Medellin tour online to see the remains of the narco world is only a click away, which just shows how widespread the fascination with narcoculture has become. One could argue that in a way, Colombia exports narcoculture and narconovelas, and profits from the fascination that the viewers have with the narco world. Although most people do not approve of the violence and terrorism caused by the cartels, the fact that narconovelas, both the Latin American ones and US produced series like Narcos (2015), give these characters a personality, a

mindset, a family and friends, makes it harder for the viewers to completely detach from the situation and simply view these characters like brutal killers and criminals.

Narcos (2015) has attracted tremendous fans and viewers and has been renewed for a 4th season, which will most likely premiere in 2018. The fans, most of who are detached from the real life consequences caused by cartel violence, are impatiently waiting for a new season which will shift from Colombian cartels to Mexico's Juarez Cartel. In the meantime, a Netflix location manager, Carlos Muñoz Portal, was scouting for locations where the fourth season could be filmed when he was shot and brutally murdered under mysterious circumstances (Collins: 2017). The unfortunate event raised concerns worldwide and shocked the Narcos TV series fans, which is rather paradoxical, because by actively watching and glorifying these narconovelas, one is indirectly contributing to the narco underground world that Latin America has fought so hard to prevent.

The narconovela industry has always been highly controversial for this reason, as figures like Pablo Escobar, Armado Carillo, and Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez start being looked up to despite their lack of ethics and empathy. The controversy in this context can be characterized by admiration and support of the narco-figures by ordinary viewers who do not partake in the criminal world, despite being aware of their crimes and atrocities committed by the cartels. However, research has shown that although narco-icons are known for their ruthlessness and cruelty, some of them can be highly relatable to some of the lower classes.

Ruiz (2016: 57) shows the findings of her research, in which she interviewed adolescents from upper and lower classes that consumed narconovelas in order to determine how narco-figures are perceived. One of the boys from a lower social class said that he looks up to Pablo Escobar because of how much money he earned despite having humble origins, and how he gave charity to the poor, as well as owning helicopters, planes and other extravagant items only the extremely wealthy could afford. In her investigation, Ruiz establishes what was previously stated in this essay, that narco-figures are idealized and their ostentatious behavior together with extreme consumption and spending is seen as the ultimate achievement in life, despite the fact that the means through which they obtained this money are highly unethical and illegal. Since Colombia was and still is so heavily affected by the rise of cartels and organized crime, narconovelas

became highly popular as a lot of common people could find themselves in the stories which were tailored to resemble their lives and their neighborhoods.

As previously mentioned, it is highly paradoxical that the viewers would idealize narcoculture, a culture that cost Colombia so many innocent lives, but this goes a lot deeper than just glorification of violence in the media. Poverty and social inequality, as well as loss of faith and trust in the state and government, are only some of the main reasons because of which those who are less fortunate resort to taking the narco path (Schenkler: 2009: 81). A combination of all these factors, and the fact that telenovelas, which as mentioned earlier are extremely popular among common folk in Colombia, indirectly makes narconovelas a powerful tool for further spreading narcoculture. Like every other culture, in order to gain more followers, it needs a means through which it can reach more people.

The fact that narcoculture is so present in Colombian media and the fact that narconovelas have almost taken over the telenovela industry is a big indicator of an “evil circle” that enables the never-ending pattern. Since narcoculture is such a big issue in Colombia, it becomes one of the main topics in the media. Since the media focuses so much on it, instead of helping combat the problem, it instead spreads the problem further as it reaches a wider audience that starts idealizing it and reenacting it in real life.

In fact, in the recent years it is quite common to see media articles that contain the word narco followed by a hyphen and a noun, for example narco-world, narco-icon and narco-fashion among others. This kind of language is very contemporary and it is an indication that narcoculture is so popular that even new linguistic prefixes and suffixes need to be invented in order to properly be able to describe the phenomena. Although from a purely logical perspective, telenovelas are just a means of entertainment, it is highly underestimated how much these series represent and affect the general population. Since they are usually based on problems that the society is currently facing, it could be argued that telenovelas have become a voice of popular opinion in Colombia.

4. EL SICARIATO – A PROFESSION AS A RESULT OF NARCO CULTURE

With the cartels rising to power in Colombia and Mexico, there was a strong need to protect the economic interests of the cartels from anyone who might be working against them. Physical protection, intimidation, extortion and executions became every day chores for the new narco-

related profession, sicariato (Schlenker: 2009: 77). Cartel leaders found themselves to be in constant danger, either from the state that is trying to dismantle their business or from rival cartels who are simply trying to drive out their competition. In order to maintain power and financial gains from illicit businesses, the leaders started hiring men who would be in charge of physically protecting them and their cartel by intimidating or eliminating any adversary that happens to be in the way.

The term sicario, which translates to a person that kills others for money, started being more and more frequently heard in Colombia during the 1980s, until it eventually became so widespread that it turned into a sector of narcoculture, el sicariato (organized murder). Initially, the typical sicario of Medellin during the 1980s was a young and uneducated man from a marginalized social class, who would be paid to kill someone by shooting them at a close range from a motorcycle. However, the demand for organized murder grew so much that it developed into a sector of the narco-business. El sicariato does not only consist of hitmen, but also of “indirect contributors” (Schlenker: 2009: 80), such as those who supply the cartels with inside information about their adversaries, vehicle renting businesses that rent cars or motorcycles which are to be used in an assassination, the illegal supply and trade of weapons and anything else that indirectly contributes to organized murder.

El Tiempo, using crime statistics from the Ministry of Defense (2015), estimates that half of the murders committed in Colombia are by paid assassins. Currently, there are 29,000 people incarcerated for having murdered someone in cold blood and received payment for it. This is a highly alarming number and compared to international crime statistics, Colombia still has a high sicariato rate internationally. Since these statistics are from 2015, more than a decade after the dismantlement of Colombia’s biggest cartels, the figures are expected to have been much higher during the 1990s, which is one of the darkest decades in Colombia’s contemporary history. Combating sicarios and illegal organizations that turned murder into business became the primary focus of the Colombian police, and they have managed to reduce the number of people murdered by sicarios from 66 habitants per 100,000 in the late 1990s and early 2000s to 26 habitants per 100,000 currently.

Young men who are recruited as sicarios are first asked to commit a crime of initiation, for example killing a drug addict or a homeless person, and if successful they receive their first paid

task to kill a target of the cartel's choice. The authorities estimate that a hitman receives anywhere between 200,000 to 500,000 pesos per murder, which equals to approximately 60 to 150 euros. El Tiempo then further states that the Colombian authorities estimate that 9 out of 10 murders in Colombia are unsolved and the perpetrators are simply not caught and sentenced, which makes crime statistics even harder to analyze and that there are probably a lot more sicarios and clandestine organizations than it is known.

Schlenker compares the growth of el sicariato to a capitalist model, where it is simply about supply and demand and the demand to kill was very high when the cartels were at the peak of their power. Considering the fact that the typical hitman of Medellin was a very young and inexperienced man, the cartel often needed to provide "training", weapons and an initiation task to see if the man is able to go through with the murder. Usually the young man would be asked to beat someone up, rob a house or break into a car, and if the task is successfully completed he would be hired by the cartel for a killing. The hitman was expected to be loyal to the cartel, obedient and to follow orders, but at the same time, hitmen were usually not considered full blown members of the cartel in Colombia. This is because young sicarios often worked independently, meaning that anyone with money could buy their services and only more "experienced" sicarios could be considered for cartel membership. For example, Pablo Escobar was always guarded by a group of armed senior sicarios that were in charge of his safety and that of his family and loved ones, while adolescent boys carried out the assassinations of his behalf.

The fact that a young sicario is expected to be obedient and loyal to the cartel, but at the same time not considered trustworthy enough to be a full member, is very contradictory (Schlenker: 2009: 82). In fact, the relationship between Colombian cartels and their sicarios has always been very controversial. On one hand, a sicario is often viewed as an independent "contractor", in the sense that he provides his services to the highest bidder and therefore cannot be considered trustworthy of cartel membership, but at the same time the cartels still expect the sicario to be loyal and obedient and to keep information confidential. However, this was not always a strict rule, as there is one really important exception in Colombia, in which a sicario was the integral part of a cartel: the case of Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez.

The relationship between sicarios and cartels is even more contradictory in Alias JJ's case; he was not only a cartel member, but one of the top inner circle members that was extremely close

to the leader, Pablo Escobar. In fact, Pablo Escobar trusted him so much that he put him in charge of the entire sicariato sector of the Medellin cartel, as well as to be the mastermind of terrorist activities that were to be carried out against the Colombian government, such as the bombing of the Avianca Flight 203, the kidnappings of Andres Pastrana Arango, Francisco Santos and attorney Carlos Mauro Hoyos, among many other kidnappings, killings and terrorist activities.

The relationship and the level of closeness between Alias JJ and Pablo Escobar was rather unusual in comparison to other cartel-sicario relationships, which is something that Jhon Jairo is very proud of and always boasts about it during interviews, such as in the documentary *Alias JJ la celebridad del mal* (2017) and his book. Considering the fact that at this point the story is only told from Jhon Jairo's angle, even if he is attempting to exaggerate the closeness he might have had with Pablo Escobar, they still have photographs together from La Catedral and eyewitnesses that have seen them together, all of which is documented in the latest 2017 documentary, which alone is enough to prove that they were closer than other cartel leaders were with their sicarios in Colombia at the time. One could argue that Jhon Jairo was not only a senior level sicario but also a link between the cartel and the independent sicarios that were on the street looking for work.

Although he also started off as a regular sicario, he slowly gained the cartel's trust and became entrusted with delicate and complex matters which could not be planned or handled by a young and inexperienced sicario from the street. Jhon Jairo was slowly assigned more complicated tasks, until eventually he started organizing the murders of politicians and other important figures. Over time he went from being a regular sicario, to being the leader of all operations that had to do with organized murder. Towards the end of his criminal career, instead of committing the murders directly himself, his job was more to be the mastermind that would hire the right person for the job, as well as plan out all the details and to make sure that the murder goes according to plan.

The terms sicario (as a profession) and sicariato (as a sector that englobes activities to do with the profession) are relatively contemporary terms, and it is rather clear that they originated in Colombia and Mexico, primarily due to the rise of drug cartels. However, there are also numerous factors that helped give origin to this phenomenon. Alex Schenkler argues that common factors such as the absence of appropriate state intervention, poverty, corruption and

lack of opportunities combined are some of the most frequent denominators that led to the idealization of this profession. Given the fact that illegal businesses generate a lot of money, it is rather easy for cartels to convince young men from marginalized social classes to work for them, when the amount of money they would get for one extortion, kidnapping or murder could easily be many times higher than an average monthly salary that one would receive from the state.

When the social and economic conditions do not permit people to live decently and have basic human rights, and the work opportunities they have do not help them get out of poverty, it is highly likely that there will be someone among those people, ready to stab or to commit a violent act, just to be able to permanently or even temporarily get out of poverty (Schenkler: 2009: 81). However, the fact that the cartels were offering more money than young men in Medellin could have hoped to earn legally in the 1980s and the 1990s is not the only reason that some chose to pursue this type of criminal career. As it can be seen in the case of Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez, a lot of young men aspired to work for the cartel because of the prestige that it would bring them in their neighborhoods and among their friends. As unusual as this may appear to an outsider, the culture of violence and transgression had spread so far in the poor neighborhoods of Colombia that many considered cartel membership as a symbol of social status. Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez particularly takes pride in having been a part of the Medellin cartel, and both in the telenovela *Alias JJ* (2017) and the Caracol TV documentary (2017), and compares Pablo Escobar to a god, that he would even kill his own family for. The moral values had become so twisted that violent acts which were something to be ashamed of in the past eventually became a symbol of pride for a lot of young men in Colombia.

5. JHON JAIRO VELASQUEZ VASQUEZ – A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez “El Popeye” was born in Antioquia, Colombia in 1961. Although little is known about his childhood and upbringing, an interesting fact is that Jhon Jairo entered the criminal world at a rather young age. He claims that he comes from a perfectly “normal” family and that he was not neglected as a child. However, despite good family conditions, he spent a lot of time on the street as a young boy where he would witness crimes and hang out with gangs, which eventually influenced him to become a part of that world. Although after graduating from high school, he was admitted to the Colombian military academy, where he served for the navy, but found very little joy in this profession. As he states in the Caracol TV

documentary about his life, *Alias JJ la celebridad del mal* (2017), his whole life he dreamed of shooting guns, fighting and killing, and there was nothing of this sort in the navy.

Shortly after giving up on his career in the military, Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez started working for the Medellin Cartel, climbing the ladder until he eventually became the head of Pablo Escobar's security and his personal hitman. He has confessed to killing over 350 people and being responsible for over 3,000 deaths indirectly. In addition to these murders, Jhon Jairo also led the operations of many political kidnappings, such as the kidnappings of Andres Pastrana Arango (mayor candidate of Bogota, who later became president), Francisco Santos (vice president of Colombia), and attorney Carlos Mauro Hoyos (who was also murdered in captivity). Jhon Jairo Velasquez also confessed to have been involved in sabotaging the Avianca Flight 203 in 1989 (Mcfadden: 1994), which caused the deaths of 107 passengers and 3 people on the ground that were killed by the falling debris. The airplane took off in Bogota, after which the explosives were detonated on board and the aircraft went down in flames. The bombing of the Avianca Flight 203 was the deadliest terrorist attack by the Medellin Cartel and the motive was to kill the then presidential candidate Cesar Gaviria Trujillo, who wanted to end the Medellin Cartel and extradite its most powerful members. However, Cesar Gaviria was not on that flight and went on to become Colombia's president and continued his campaign against drug trafficking and cartel violence.

Jhon Jairo turned himself in to the Colombian justice in 1992, and he was sentenced to 30 years in prison for terrorism, drug trafficking and homicide. After serving three quarters of his sentence, Jhon Jairo was released from prison where he spent 23 years and 3 months of his life (BBC: 2016). Upon his release, he started his own video blog on Youtube in 2015 where he discusses politics, his life as a sicario in the Medellin Cartel, as well as his life after prison. His youtube channel, POPEYE_Arrepentido, became extremely popular and as of November 2017, he has more than half a million subscribers. On the 24th of January 2017, Jhon Jairo's Youtube channel received an award, a silver play button, for having reached over 100,000 subscribers (Velasquez: 2017). Since his release from prison, he also published a book in 2015, *Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar* that discusses his entire criminal history and gives insight about the 23 years he spent in jail. Both the book and his Youtube channel attracted a very wide range of audience, not just in Colombia but also abroad. Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez was very well

known in Colombia, but through his Youtube video blog and his book, he also managed to become an international figure, reaching people as far as Europe.

Because of his criminal past, the fact that his Youtube channel became so popular provoked a lot of people in Colombia. In the documentary *Alias JJ la celebridad del mal* (2017), some of his victims and children of deceased victims were interviewed and found it outrageous that he was getting so much publicity after all the damage that he caused. To make matters even more provoking, Caracol Television and Netflix co-produced a narconovela called *Alias J.J.- Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar* (2017) based on the book that Jhon Jairo wrote while he was in prison. The narconovela premiered on Netflix in early 2017 and attracted many viewers from countries like USA, Argentina, Canada, Brazil, Spain and Portugal. At the same time, it was also broadcasted in Colombia, on Caracol TV, which caused a lot of controversy as some of the victims relived the pain which they were hoping to leave behind.

Jhon Jairo's case brings us to the debate of Nature vs Nurture. Some philosophers like Jhon Locke believe that humans are born as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) and that no knowledge or behavior is innate. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Jhon Locke argues how a child learns everything through their upbringing and from those closest to them. However, Popeye's family was not abusive nor problematic, which comes as a surprise to most, and he did not learn to be violent from them. However, according to Albert Cohen, violence and gang culture is something that is usually learned from the streets.

The theory is that young lower-class men, who usually live in a society that has no parallel with the actual social reality, start forming their own norms and rules in order to replace the ones imposed by the social reality. Frustrated that they do not form a part of the society, they create their own culture, one in which they impose symbols of social status, values and aspirations. As Albert Cohen argues, violence and gang culture usually spread in poverty, and although other scholars argue that family conditions can often indicate how prone a child will be to becoming violent, they often forget the importance of the child's surroundings outside the family home. Our parents and siblings are usually those that we develop our first emotional bonds with, but the reality of our society is that since a very early age, we spend usually nine hours per day at school or away from our parents because they are usually working. Nine hours per day is more than half of the entire time that we are awake, and at a vulnerable age, that is more than enough to lead

young people astray, especially if a number of those hours are spent with people that could be a bad emotional and psychological influence.

6. ALIAS JJ – THE NARCONOVELA SYNOPSIS

The narconovela starts at the time during which Jhon Jairo was considering whether to turn himself in to the Colombian authorities or not. As the government was starting to crack down on cartels and organized violence, a safe way to escape death and perhaps even be a free man again was to get a plea deal and turn oneself in to the authorities. Jhon Jairo's then girlfriend, Alexandra, was constantly pressuring him to turn himself in as she was pregnant and the deal proposed by the Colombian justice was a prison sentence of only 7 years and immunity for all confessed crimes, as long as Jhon Jairo provides them information about his and other cartels. Although hesitant about the deal, Jhon Jairo accepts it after a conversation with Pablo Escobar, who tells him that it is probably better that he goes to prison first and that way “prepare” the territory for him and other Medellin Cartel members for when the war on drugs is over.

Jhon Jairo accepts the plea deal and gets married to Alexandra in the prison courtyard and looks forward to doing his seven-year prison sentence in peace. However, the first obstacle presents itself when due to an unforeseen circumstance, Jhon Jairo is transferred from the Medellin prison to a prison in Bogota. Shortly after, Pablo Escobar is assassinated by the Colombian police and Jhon Jairo is in Bogota, far away from the privileges and protection that he had in the Medellin prison.

The murder of Pablo Escobar was a turning point in this narconovela, as it changed everything for Jhon Jairo from then onwards. Many thought that he was getting away without any punishment and that the 7 years he got were an insult to the families of 300 victims that he murdered in cold blood. Upon his transfer to the Capital Prison (*La Carcel Capital*), he was placed in the drug traffickers ward that was under the leadership of Ivan Urrego, a high ranked drug lord from the Cartel Norte del Valle, which was Pablo Escobar's competitor and enemy. Ivan Urrego almost immediately orders the murder of Jhon Jairo, but the assassin that he sent, Alias el Potro, fails and ends up gravely wounded by Jhon Jairo. At this point, Jhon Jairo realizes that in order to survive in this prison, he must do something drastic and somehow get transferred to another ward.

Shortly after, Jhon Jairo is transferred to the paramilitary ward, which was under the leadership of Abel Mahecha. What Jhon Jairo did not know is that Pablo Escobar owed Abel Mahecha a lot of money for the drugs he cultivated for the Medellin Cartel and since Pablo Escobar was dead and the Medellin Cartel had been dismantled, he expected Jhon Jairo to pay back all the money that Pablo owed. Since Jhon Jairo was not completely cooperating with the police and providing them with the information they needed, combined with his criminal activity in prison, his plea deal was retracted and he was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Jhon Jairo practically becomes Abel Mahecha's slave and in order to survive, he starts asking his wife, Alexandra, to smuggle money into the prison during conjugal visits. Alexandra, together with Jhon Jairo's only friend on the outside, Caspa, looks for hidden money chests that were left behind by the Medellin Cartel, and they end up robbing and murdering an old couple to get money for Jhon Jairo.

As time goes by, Jhon Jairo asks Alexandra to smuggle drugs and even a gun into the prison, and she grows tired of him. After almost getting caught by the prison guards, she decides to leave Jhon Jairo, after which his life in prison changes drastically.

Alexandra played a key role in Jhon Jairo's life because she tried to keep him away from danger and illegal activities. However, after she left him, constructing his own narco-empire from scratch became the purpose of his life. He started receiving letters from a female fan, Jennifer, that would soon start visiting in prison and help him create his own drug empire. Jhon Jairo started manufacturing psychedelic drugs, which were smuggled out of prison in the autobiographical books that he was writing about his life as a sicario.

With Jennifer and Caspa on the outside, the drug business started growing until finally expanding to the United States where Jennifer gets killed by a powerful local drug lord. In order to keep his business from falling apart, Jhon Jairo convinces his lawyer, Serrano, to take control over the drug distribution business in the United States. Serrano is then approached by one of Mexico's most powerful drug dealers, Amado Carrillo – The Lord of the Skies (*El señor de los cielos*) that plans to break Jhon Jairo out of prison in exchange for drug production in large quantities. The DEA found out about this plan and offered Jhon Jairo a plea deal to reduce his sentence if he helps them successfully capture the lord of the skies. He accepts the deal to get out of prison but with no intention of helping the DEA. After a series of attempts to capture the lord

of the skies, the DEA manages to capture Jhon Jairo, annuls his plea deal, and he is returned to his prison cell in Bogota, where he will live out the remainder of his sentence of 30 years.

7. ALIAS JJ – REACTIONS TO POPEYE AND THE NARCONOVELA

The narconovela achieved a wide audience and success, scoring 8/10 on IMBD and in addition to being shown on Colombian TV, it also appeared on Netflix and was available in various countries with English, Spanish and Portuguese subtitles. Popeye became more popular than ever, not just in Colombia but also internationally since the TV series was on Netflix, and with this came the controversy. In the documentary *Alias JJ la celebridad del mal* (2017), a late victim's son discusses how when Popeye's telenovela is on TV, he refuses to watch it and changes the channel as a sign of boycott because he finds it so disrespectful.

The fact that this narconovela is popular and has penetrated Colombia's biggest cultural industry, the telenovela industry, is an alarming sign for the society. Colombia struggles with narcoculture, and the younger generations that were born after the Medellin Cartel's and Cali Cartel's dismantlement, are now adolescents and young people, who are getting drawn into the narco-world by the people in their neighborhoods, and perhaps even more importantly, media. Although Jhon Jairo is convicted for terrible crimes and spends more than two decades in prison, he is actually the protagonist of the story and he is receiving both a lot of positive and negative media attention.

Despite the fact that the narconovela is loosely based on his book and many parts of it are fictional, the series is directed in a way which portrays Jhon Jairo as a narco-boss rather than a sicario, someone that is feared and controls masses of men, is desired by beautiful women despite being in prison, and has power over the government as well as the DEA because of his inside cartel knowledge. It could be argued that this narconovela is directed in a way to portray him as a "mini" Pablo Escobar, who also happens to be the figure that Jhon Jairo admires and looks up to the most. Jhon Jairo spent two and a half decades in prison, and his time in prison was definitely not as "glamorous" as portrayed in the telenovela, as he did not participate in any government missions and did not help capture the lord of the skies.

The lead female characters in Popeye's life, Alexandra and Jennifer, are also fictional just like the psychedelic drug empire that Jhon Jairo controls from prison with the help of Caspa. Anyone who knows Popeye's story and has seen the narconovela can guess that it has been highly exaggerated and dramatized, in order for Jhon Jairo to appear as a narco-boss or narco-hero, something that he never was as he was always in Pablo Escobar's shadow. Although Jhon Jairo claims that he is sorry for his crimes and he is no longer a criminal, the fact that this narconovela was so exaggerated and directed to make him a narco-boss, shows otherwise. If his goal were to simply tell his story and of how he served time for his crimes, the series would have been told truthfully without exaggerations.

To sum up, the narconovela based on Jhon Jairo's story is undoubtedly exaggerated and parts of the story are fictional, yet it has been a huge success not only on Colombian TV but also internationally. This raises the question: why? In order to understand why this narconovela attracted such a wide audience given the fact that this is a serious issue that Colombia has still not recovered from, one should reflect back to the definition of narcoculture. As previously defined, narcoculture is a culture of ostentation (Rincon 2013: 3), a culture of consumerism, fast money regardless of ethics or morals, a culture in which violence is justified and in which respect equals fear. Jhon Jairo's telenovela with him as the protagonist fits all the elements of narcoculture and portrays him as the typical narco-hero, one whose only long-term life path is in the hospital, prison or the cemetery.

Although at the beginning of the telenovela Jhon Jairo plays Pablo Escobar's subordinate, after his death it is clear that Jhon Jairo slowly takes on the role of a narco-boss himself as the story progresses. This is a clear indication of that Jhon Jairo still aspires towards the criminal lifestyle although he does not publicly admit it. The glorification of violence and narcoculture in this telenovela, as well as the complete disregard for the victims who lost their lives, as well as their children, is why this narconovela is so controversial in Colombia. The story focuses solely on Popeye as a narco-leader and his wars with other cartels, the paramilitary groups and the guerilla. The innocent civilian victims are rarely talked about and when mentioned in the series, their deaths are usually indirectly justified by claiming that it was a war and there are always casualties in every single war.

Yet still, the narconovela and its narco-ideals are still so popular among the viewers. This is because of a pre-existing narcoculture already engrained in the society, where human life is measured by money and symbols of social status regardless of the means to acquire it. The controversy in this case is that despite the atrocities committed by Popeye, he is seen as a hero by many because of the way that he reinforces narco-ideals, and although he publicly apologizes for the murders, he still talks about his criminal career as if it were an honorable achievement, and many believe it actually is.

In order to see people's opinions firsthand, a series of Youtube comments have been compiled in Annex A, which were found under the trailer video of the narconovela *Alias JJ- Sobreviviendo a Pablo Escobar*. In June 2018, the video had over a million views, 8.7 thousand likes and only 547 dislikes, which means that only 6% of the voters disliked the video or were against the narconovela. When analyzing the comments section, it was soon clear that there were more positive comments than the negative ones. Although it was to be expected since the narconovela scored so well on IMDB and was one of the most viewed series in Colombia the night it premiered, it shows a clear sign of narco-mentality among his fans, who see his life story as an inspiration and achievement.

The positive comments regarding Popeye and his narconovela, are written by fans not only in Colombia but from all over the world, expressing their support for him as a person, as well as a capo. One of the comments is from someone allegedly in Spain, who says that although they do not agree with that Jhon Jairo has done with his life, referring to his criminal career, they find him inspiring because of all that he went through. Others simply express their support for his persona and call him names like capo, sicario, the best, idol, cool... etc.

An interesting observation made while analyzing opinions of Popeye, is that a lot of fans call him capo, with the intent to compliment him. As previously discussed, capo, is a name given to drug lords or cartel leaders, but in this case, it is being used as a way to compliment someone because being a capo means being one of the highest ranked narcos. This is a clear indication of narcoculture, because a word that would normally be seen as derogatory, is in fact being used and perceived as one of the most flattering compliments. A viewer from Argentina also expresses his support for Popeye, and states that Popeye was a capo, a big boss, in the criminal

world, but now that he is out he can also become a capo in the legal sense, meaning that he believes in Popeye's entrepreneurial abilities. Once again, the word capo is being used to describe something successful, honorable, business minded and to be proud of.

There are also some supporters who seem to distance themselves away from the narco-mentality, by stating that Popeye is simply a product of the society that he was living in and that they feel sorry for him for this reason. Others, compare Popeye's figure to that of politicians in their country, such as the viewer from Venezuela, who states that although Popeye has killed a lot of people, the real thieves and murderers are the politicians, for whom she has a lot less respect for than cartel members. In general, the fans who support Popeye seem to support him for different reasons, but all those reasons are a proof of a pre-existing narcoculture in the society. Whether they believe he is a product of a narco-like community where he lived, that violence equals to dominance and respect or whether being a capo and spending excessive money is an honorable title to have, it is clear that narco-mentality is present.

The negative comments about Popeye are less versatile in the number of reasons why they do not support him, but they are generally against the crime culture and illegality. Some viewers call Popeye a cold-blooded psychopath and think that he has a mental illness, for which he should still be in prison for as they believe that someone who murdered so many people should not be in the society. Others believe that due to his heinous crimes, he should not be given any media attention and all those who are supporting him or giving him attention are indirectly as evil as him and that cartels and narcoculture should be eradicated and not supported.

A rather unique comment by a viewer states that Popeye is a coward, because he would shoot at unarmed victims with a gun and would run away from armed conflicts. The viewer then further explains that the gun is a weapon of a soldier, of a paramilitary or a guerilla, and that Popeye is nothing more than a simple torturer and a coward. The reason this comment was picked out, is because despite his lack of support for Popeye, it shows a submerged narco-mentality. The viewer believes that one should not attack unarmed victims, but that one should use weapons in armed conflict, and seems to indirectly express support for the paramilitary and the guerilla. This further helps reinforce the belief that a culture of violence has already existed before Popeye became famous, and if it were not for the admiration of violence, easily acquired wealth or the narco-world, narcoculture would simply not exist. Another negative comment criticizes Popeye's

continuous affirmations that he is a practicing Christian, as according to Christianity, it is a sin to kill and that Popeye should fear god for his actions if he is truly not sorry for his sins.

8. JHON JAIRO VELASQUEZ VASQUEZ – THE EMBODIMENT OF NARCOCULTURE

It is undeniable that Jhon Jairo is a very controversial figure, but there is a lot more to him than just committing crime for money. One could argue that he is the embodiment of narcoculture in Colombia, as the way he thinks and acts seems to be a byproduct of a destructive culture that started spreading in Colombia like a virus. Although Popeye is probably one of the most extreme cases, it is indisputable that there were many who shared his mentality in Medellin during the 1980s and 1990s, and there still may be a number of men with a similar mentality today. The idea behind analyzing Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez is not to analyze and understand the behavior of an isolated case, but to understand a whole group of people whose mindset was shaped by narcoculture.

The presence of narcoculture did not only cause an increase in organized crime and murders, it also shaped young Colombian generations on a subconscious level. As gangs started growing, a lot of young people like Popeye were pulled into the narco world simply by socializing with neighborhood gangs and witnessing crime.

Young men and women are exceptionally vulnerable when exposed to certain behaviors and beliefs, which is why it is no surprise that so many young people in Colombia were affected by narcoculture just by being from certain neighborhoods. In order to understand how a figure like Jhon Jairo became who he is, it is not enough to only analyze his crimes and his Cartel de Medellin membership. The key to his behavior is in his mentality, beliefs and the way that he expresses himself. For this reason, interviews and documentaries in which he tells his story are of particular importance when it comes to understanding how deeply narcoculture can be engrained in someone's personality and belief system.

Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez was interviewed for a Peruvian newspaper Redaccion Trome by Jhonny Valle in 2015, which can be found in Annex B, in which he discusses his feelings and

opinion of Pablo Escobar, whether he is sorry for having committed crimes, as well as his suggestions on how young people can be prevented from heading down the same path as him.

After having spent more than 2 decades in prison, Jhon Jairo is extremely happy to be free again, but at the same time he is not afraid of prison and if for some reason he has to go back, he will do it without fear. He proceeds to tell Jhonny Valle about his childhood, which to many readers' surprise was normal and happy. One usually expects children from broken homes and problematic parents to be more drawn to this way of life, but this was not Popeye's case. In fact, he even believes that it is nurture rather than nature that shapes children into future adults. When asked if a criminal is born a criminal or becomes one due to his surroundings, he answers "Todos los niños son buenos, los de Perú, los de Colombia, los de México. Lo que hace al bandido es el entorno", which means that all children are born good, regardless of which part of the world they are born in. It is the surroundings which make a criminal.

Although he had a good home and family, as a young boy he would go out on the street and witness shootings, the mafia, fights and stabbings, which made him normalize violence. Jhonny Valle then asks him how he felt the first time he met Pablo Escobar, and he said that it felt like meeting a god. It was not unusual to idealize and admire narco bosses, but for Jhon Jairo, Pablo Escobar was a lot more than just an admirable figure, he even considered Pablo Escobar's life more important than his own. The idea that a cartel leader, who is responsible for the deaths of hundreds or even thousands of people, is a person that is admired and respected by others is one of the paradoxes of narcoculture. The values of what is right and what is wrong are extremely distorted, where being violent equals to being respected and obtaining fast money through illicit means is the main goal of a young person.

Jhonny Valle then asks Popeye if he only killed for money, to which he answers that the main motivation was to kill for the cause, and in this case the cause was to prevent extradition of Colombian citizens to United States prisons. This gave origin to a war in which the cartels fought the state to prevent extradition of narco-bosses, and this war claimed thousands of innocent lives simply because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time. Popeye justifies their deaths by saying that it was a war, and innocent people die in wars, as if it were something that was natural and simply just needs to be accepted. He then says that he is in fact sorry for what he has done,

and that he apologizes not just on behalf of himself but also on the behalf of the Medellin Cartel, as the last remaining survivor.

The interviewer then quickly changes the topic to Hacienda Napoles and which famous Latin American artists came to Pablo Escobar's parties, to which Jhon Jairo replies that some of the popular artists were Chespirito, Hector Lavoe and Joe Arroyo. Although he apologizes for the wrongdoings of the cartel and the deaths of innocent people, it is undeniable that Jhon Jairo looks back at this past with a certain level of pride. Despite the fact that he publicly denies this and claims to be sorry for his wrongdoings, whenever he is asked about Pablo Escobar or the times during which he was a cartel member, he usually explains how "el patron" was humble, a gentleman and great towards him but leaves out the horrifying details that Colombians remember Pablo Escobar by.

When asked about the times during which he was at the peak of his criminal career, he usually refers to it as having been a "general" in Pablo Escobar army, he mentions the power, being feared, killing people that crossed Pablo Escobar and earning a lot of money. He expresses his thoughts and feelings which make it very clear just how deeply narcoculture has affected him. The fact that he feels pride over the things previously mentioned shows that he has a narco-mentality, a mentality that is based on distorted moral values in which money and the superficial are worth more than human lives.

Narcoculture and narco-mentality promote some of human kind's most psychopathic and antisocial traits, as it is a culture in which there is no empathy and very little trust in other people, even among the closest family members. Emotions are seen as weak and families as a burden, while illicit money and violence are in abundance. Jhonny Valle later asks Jhon Jairo how he thinks the world should remember Pablo Escobar, to which he answers that the world should remember him as a terrorist, kidnapper, and extortionist but that he also helped people, built houses and football courts for the people, beat the state and killed 540 policemen. From this sentence alone, it is very obvious that Jhon Jairo not only justifies his wrongdoings just because he constructed houses and football fields for some people, but that he feels that beating the state and killing policemen is a sort of an accomplishment.

This interview is extremely important when it comes to researching and understanding the narco-mentality and just how deep narcoculture can affect a person, or in this case, a big part of a

nation. However, to be able to eradicate narcoculture and the idealization of the narco-world, it is possible that the key may be in figures like Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez.

When asked by the interviewer how he believes the sector of sicariato could be eradicated or stopped, he answers that the state would need to reinforce security, use technology to tap into phones and WhatsApp, hire informants who would report any illegal activity they see on the streets, and most importantly, that the state would need to emphasize on improving the poor neighborhoods, encouraging sports, culture and education, as well as raising the salaries of policemen. This coincides with the previously discussed Alex Schlenker's view that poverty, social inequality and the lack of government intervention are some of the most common factors that when combined can become the perfect ground for cartels and violence (Schenkler: 2009: 81). However, the way that Jhon Jairo believes that the state could intervene to prevent illegal activities and organized crime is precisely what the cartels fought against.

The goal of most cartels is to destabilize the state, diminish government intervention and take advantage of the social inequality to attract more followers that would be willing to do anything to protect the cartels' interests for a price. He suggests that the governments should precisely do what the cartels are fighting against, which in a way is paradoxical since he also takes pride in being the last surviving Medellin Cartel member. The use of informants and technology to spy on adversaries was not only a technique used by the government to prevent crime, but also by other cartels to spy on enemies and get inside information about possible attacks or retaliations, drug shipments or trades. Although the government and the cartels are opposing sides, it could be argued that they have a lot of similarities.

Both the cartels and the government impose an order and rules on the society and its communities, employment, punishment for acting against the established rules, and both parties use the same techniques to surveil their adversaries. For this reason, it is rather clear that the intention behind climbing up the cartel ladder is not only for financial reasons, but for power and the ability to rule over others, which in the narco-world is a symbol for a very elevated social status. When asked about what he advises young men who aspire to be sicarios, Popeye states that he is extremely against this career path and that those young men should look for a new goal or passion in life. He says that there are only three possible consequences of being a paid hitman;

a life in prison, the hospital or death. Jhonny Valle then asks him if he believes in God, to which he answers that he is a firm believer.

Narcoculture, like most other cultures, usually comes with its own set beliefs and in this case Christian beliefs are often adapted to the narco-world, creating something commonly known as narcocreyes (narco-believers). Christianity preaches forgiveness, and those that truly repent for their sins can go to heaven, but at the same time murder is one of the most serious offenses. Jhonny Valle concludes the interview by asking Popeye where he thinks his soul will go after he dies, to which he answers “Escrito está en la Biblia. Dice que si uno se arrepiente, es totalmente salvo. Yo iré a la diestra de Dios, iré al cielo.”¹

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this research was to determine whether a narco-figure like Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez personifies narcoculture in Colombian media, with the primary focus on his presence in narconovelas, documentaries and interviews. After having defined narcoculture and its subgroups and compared the points of view of different authors, it can be concluded that Jhon Jairo in fact does act as a symbol of narcoculture in Colombian media, and that despite the controversy that his statements cause, he still has a wide audience of admirers who buy his books and watch his series.

The controversy in this case is that narcoculture and narco-mentality is so prevalent that someone like Popeye is admired and praised despite having committed so many violent crimes. If a culture of crime, violence and ostentation did not already exist, a figure like him would have never achieved the fame or the success that he is achieving. It is undeniable that despite being morally wrong, his values and the narco-mentality are extremely popular in Colombia and the rest of Latin America, which just shows how deeply engrained narcoculture is in the society.

On the other hand, there were also many negative reactions to Popeye as a narco-figure, especially to his documentary and narconovela, stating that he is a cold-blooded psychopath and that his appearance in the media is an insult to the victims of the Medellin Cartel. However, he is also being praised by a lot of fans for his behavior as a lot of fans find him inspiring for having been such a high-ranking cartel member, for having worked with some of the most important

¹“ It is written in the Bible. It says that if one repents for their sins, one is completely forgiven. I will go to heaven.”

capos, and for his violent behavior. This is because in narcoculture, it is admirable to be a narco, to establish dominance through financial and physical power, and it is popular to spend excessively and use flashy narco-symbols for social status. Narcoculture praises violence, ostentation and any means possible regardless of ethics, in order to get out of poverty and actively show a superior social status to others.

Narcoculture existed before Jhon Jairo started working for the Medellin Cartel, and its values are what attracted him to starting a criminal career in the first place. As a young man, he witnessed gang culture and violence on the street, as well as how easy it is to earn money through illicit means. A combination of poverty and bad social conditions, together with the lack of state provided opportunities is usually the reason why young people lose faith in the state and the law (Schenkler: 2009: 81).

When neighborhoods that have been struggling with extreme poverty are presented with an opportunity to earn money and live the life that they only see celebrities living on TV, people are a lot more likely to fall into the “trap” of narcoculture. Jhon Jairo is in this case both a result and the cause of narcoculture, since he was drawn into the narco-world, he uses his fame and reputation to further spread the narco-mentality and narco-ideals through social media, narconovelas, interviews, documentaries and his books.

However, although many judge his way of earning money and trying to reintegrate into the society, his actions are perfectly legal. He served his sentence in prison, and he has the same rights as any Colombian citizen from a legal point of view. Jhon Jairo is only popular because of his followers and because people are giving him media attention. If people were not interested in what he had to say and did not believe in the ideals of narcoculture, he would not have any followers and would simply perish from the eyes of the media. The reason that he is popular is because his followers, both in Colombia and internationally, are enabling him by watching his series and reading his books. Considering the amount of media attention and followers he gained with his story, even TV production companies like Caracol TV and Netflix quickly gained interest in him, because narcoculture sells.

In addition to the above mentioned factors, social inequality and a weak presence of the state also contribute towards spreading narcoculture and create opportunities for figures like Popeye or Pablo Escobar to gain a large number of followers. During the late 1980s and 1990s, the lower

social classes were tending to lose faith in the state as the state could not provide them opportunities or basic necessities, and narco-figures started being praised for their contributions to the slums, charity work and employment opportunities within the cartel. The lower classes would observe the wealthy cartel members and how they have everything they would want, such as expensive cars, clothes, power, respect, beautiful women and more money than they could ever spend. This combined with the fact that the state did not provide any legal options for these people to get social mobility, only made the narcos and narcoculture more popular. It is also important to take into account that narco-icons are usually of humble origin, which further reinforces the idea that people of a lower class can achieve social mobility and riches through a criminal career.

To sum up, Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez is simply a medium that transmits narcoculture, a culture that already exists and is not only limited to those who actively partake in crime, as a lot of ordinary people have a narco-mentality and dream of living a glamorous and luxurious life. A culture that has already spread throughout big parts of Colombia and Latin America. Although he serves as a medium to spread narco-mentality and narco-ideals through popular media, without mass followers and even admirers of his criminal life style, his books, series or documentaries would have no ways of promoting narcoculture alone.

The problem does not only lay in Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez, but in the society itself. Many argue that his presence in the media only serves to corrupt the young minds and show a bad picture of Colombia abroad, but he cannot be the only person to blame, because if he was not representing what people believed in and supported, he would have no media attention and the audience would not be able to relate to him.

One person cannot be responsible for corrupting an entire nation unless the seed is already there, which it is. Jhon Jairo's role as a "distributor" of narco-culture is based on the fact that these issues are already pre-existing in a society, and by expressing his mentality and his ideals, the issue of narcoculture is simply reinforced and further encouraged. A combination of different factors, such as poverty, a pre-existing gang culture and the culture of consumerism combined, create a ground for persons like Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez to achieve fame and followers, despite the fact that the lifestyle is morally wrong and results in deaths of thousands and possibly millions of people in the future. Narcoculture, just like all other cultures, has a set of its own

morals, code of conduct and rules, which differ from the dominant culture in the society, which is why this subculture is so dangerous and can have terrible consequences if left uncontained and the state does not intervene to improve life conditions, like in the case of Mexico and Colombia during the peak of the cartels. The fact that Jhon Jairo Velasquez Vasquez generated so much interest and so many followers in Colombia only shows that narcoculture is a serious societal issue, and even though Colombia's dark cartel era is the past, narcoculture still remains in the present.

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ANNEXES

A - YOUTUBE COMMENTS

- **Eddison Eraso** - este psicopata que deberia estar en la carcel ahora vive de contar todos los crimenes que cometio, eso es preiar a la delincuentes. que tercermundistas somos

- **Javier Franco** Muy buena pope.... te apoyo.

- **Stan Escalier** Viva Popeye Y el Gran Pablo Escobar que serie más buena saludos desde Bolivia

- **Ivan Orts Martinez** Hola popeye soy Ivan te escribro desde España primero que todo decirte que te admiro muchisimo por todo lo que has pasado para poder sobrevivir no estoy de acuerdo con lo que hsd echo con tu vida, pero a la misma vez te entendi y respeto porque en Colombia la cosa era otra me encantaria poder conocerte algun dia cuando valla para colombia, fuerte abraza Pope cuidate mucho espero respuesta

-**Belen ibañez** pope estas arrasando con todo, sos una topadora que nadie lo para, me alegra de como vas creciendo y tienes para más, no vi la serie todavía porque no me da las opciones por internet y en argentina no la pasan, reniego por eso,, pero te queria dejar el mensaje de que como fuiste un capo para la mafia, tambien sos capo para hacerte y triunfar de manera legal,, te saluda
DIEGO BIONDI DE ARGENTINA

- **suremayx** like pope. eres mi idolo por el lado bueno que tienes amigo saludos desde españa te sigo desde doxumetales que avia de ti en la carcel

- **Lennin udiell Pastran rodriguez** les doy la absoluta razon. yo no entiendo como este animal sin corazón es famoso. hay que secuestrarle a su familia para que sienta

-**O R** I guess Popeye is a product of his time and environment, yet most people does not become

callous and evil like that even when they grow up under such conditions. He says he isn't a psychopath, but he is completely cold emotionally, and seems to be proud of what he has done. There's a lot of videos of him on youtube, and he seems like an attention whore with no shame.

- **TAYRAKA** Alias POPEYE habla de su fusil, que irrespeto a los guerreros, él es un sicario, cogía a sus víctimas descuidadas y corría como gallina, el era un torturador, torturaba a los que le entregaban otros.... pero un fusil es el arma de los que se buscan y se enfrentan, se matan dándose plomo, el fusil es el arma del soldado, el guerrillo y el paraco, el arma de popeye es los nueve milímetros que le disparaba COBARDEMENTE a su víctima desarmada y en total descuido...QUE DEJE POPEYE DE DESPRESTIGIAR EL FUSIL, QUE ES EL ARMA DE LOS GUERREROS

-**YUKEN yuk** EN QUE MUNDO ESTAMOS DE ENDIOSAR A UN ASESINO? ¿EN QUE MUNDO ESTAMOS EN QUE DICE QUE ESTA ARREPENTIDO Y LO ÚNICO QUE HABLA ES QUE FUE Y ES UN ASESINO? ESTE TIPO NO ESTA ARREPENTIDO

- **JunioR Blogss** Coño, pero es verdad. Mata un hombre y eres asesino, mata a cientos y eres un maldito héroe, la verdad que este país y el mundo se ha vuelto un jodido circo donde los más estupidos e idiotas son los protagonistas.

- **Johanna Gonzalez** yo lo sigo a el a popeye , soy venezolana , he leído toda las historias sobre pablo , sobre el , y siento y pienso , que peores que ellos son los politicos , asi que pues no lo juzgo , siempre ha muerto personas en manos de politicos , hoy dia esta muriendo venezolanos , de hambre y quien hace algo ? un pais como mi pais , que fue nevera de millones de paises , y hoy dia ya no valemos nada para nadie , sigue asi popeye , eres ejemplo digan lo que diganporque saliste de lo malo y estas intentando reintegrarte a la sociedad que es mas cruel y peor que lo viviste ,te mando un beso un abrazo , y quien te puede juzgar y señalar solo es Dios , a nadie mas el que este libre de pecado que lance la primera piedra un besote desde venezuela

B- INTERVIEW BY JHONNY VALLE

¿Cómo está, amigo?' Agazapado en un rincón del aeropuerto de Medellín, Jhon Jairo Velásquez Vásquez me extiende la mano. Son las 7 de la noche. Recostado sobre su auto negro de lunas polarizadas, este hombre parece cualquier mortal: un polo de manga corta, jean y zapatillas. Pero se trata del sicario más letal que existió en Colombia.

Los registros oficiales indican que ‘Popeye’ mató a más de 250 personas directamente y de manera indirecta a casi 3 mil. Él lo admite. Organizó torturas, extorsiones, secuestros y atentados. Fue parte del sanguinario Cártel de Medellín, mano derecha del narcotraficante más grande en la historia de la humanidad: Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria.

A Jhon Jairo Velásquez Vásquez el mundo lo conoce como ‘Popeye’. Y él quiere que así sea. Ha venido a recogerme al aeropuerto. Hemos cuadrado la entrevista por WhatsApp. “Yo soy un teso (bravo) para las redes sociales, me acostumbré rápido”, dice mientras maneja y revisa su moderno celular. Conduce a 50 kilómetros por ahora. Cada tres segundos revisa los retrovisores. “Motociclistas, joputas. Se creen dueños de las pistas”, señala ‘Popeye’ en voz baja. En Medellín parece haber más motos que autos.

Muchos coinciden en que es una herencia de la cultura ‘traqueta’, es decir, del narcotráfico. Los motociclistas atraviesan las calles con sinvergüencería, sin respeto, a una velocidad no permitida. Si alguien les reclama, hacen el ademán de sacar una pistola de la correa. “Maricas, piensan que uno les tiene miedo”, aclara. “Gonorrea, joputa. ¿Viste cómo me metió la moto? Ayayay, papito”, reniega ‘Popeye’, quien después de 23 años de cárcel ha aprendido a controlar sus impulsos.

Si ese motociclista se hubiera cruzado en su camino hace dos décadas, ya estaría en el suelo, con una bala en la cabeza, botando sangre a borbotones. “Ahora evito cualquier tipo de enfrentamiento, amigo”, me explica. Llegamos. “Descansa. Mañana vamos a la tumba del Patrón”. Y se pierde por las calles de Medellín. Nadie sabe dónde vive ‘Popeye’. Si lo supieran ya estaría muerto. Tiene muchas ‘culebras’ (problemas). Y él está seguro que su cabeza tiene precio.

Al día siguiente, llega puntual. A las 7 de la mañana. Es miércoles 2 de diciembre. Hace exactamente 22 años, sobre los tejados de una casa en Medellín, Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria recibía un balazo en la cabeza. Con su muerte, se marcaba el fin de una de las etapas más oscuras de Colombia.

El narcotráfico mató a más de 50 mil colombianos. “Amigo peruanito, hoy vamos a la tumba del Patrón”. Cogemos la autopista regional rumbo al cementerio de Itagüí. Compra un ramo de girasoles y rosas. La tumba del capo del narcotráfico tiene una hermosa vista a la ciudad.

‘Popeye’ se arrodilla, se persigna y besa la lápida. “Le prometí que ni bien salía de la cárcel, vendría a visitarlo. Aquí estoy”. Antes de arrancar con la entrevista lanza una frase tan estremecedora como cierta: “En esta ciudad hay más cementerios que supermercados”. Sí. cementerios que él pobló con una pistola.

¿Cómo lo llamo: ‘Popeye’ o Jhon Jairo?

‘Popeye’. Si me dice Jhon Jairo, pienso que usted está bravo conmigo.

¿Siente orgullo por ese apelativo?

Sí, porque ese sobrenombre me lo hice a sangre y fuego.

¿Cómo fue su infancia?

Fue muy normal. Yo nací en un municipio a las afueras de Medellín. Viví en una casa buena.

Por lo que me cuenta, usted vivió en una familia normal, feliz...

Así es. Pero de muy jovencito sentía mucha adrenalina, tenía ganas de tener mi propio dinero y me gustaban las armas.

¿Cómo empezó su actividad mafiosa?

Pues, yo movía marihuana en mi bicicleta desde muy jovencito.

¿Un bandido nace o se hace?

Todos los niños son buenos, los de Perú, los de Colombia, los de México. Lo que hace al bandido es el entorno.

Pero usted vivía en un buen entorno...

En mi hogar sí, pero cuando salí a la calle empecé a ver mafia, empecé a ver tiroteos, peleas a cuchillo o machete. Me empecé a obnubilar con la violencia.

¿Cuándo fue la primera vez que disparó?

Siendo niño disparaba, y lo hacía bien. Todavía pego bien.

¿Cómo llega Pablo Escobar a su vida?

Yo era chofer de una de sus amantes. Un día el 'Patrón' se peleó con la niña, entonces ella se va a Estados Unidos y yo me quedé sin trabajo. Cogí el carro de mi papá y fui a buscarlo a sus caletas. Y lo encontré. Entonces le dije: 'Señor, yo conozco todas sus caletas, o me mata o me da trabajo'. Él se rio y me dio una ametralladora MP5. Ahí comencé a trabajar con él.

¿Cuál fue el primer impacto?

Fue como si me hubiera ganado el Nobel de la mafia. Porque ver a Pablo Escobar era como ver a Dios, él era muy sencillo, respetuoso, era muy humilde.

¿Usted únicamente mataba por dinero?

No, también matábamos por la causa.

¿Y cuál era la causa?

La no extradición de colombianos a los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica.

En esa guerra murió gente inocente...

Sí, el 90% de la gente que murió era inocente... Ese es el problema de la guerra.

Ahora que lo recuerda, ¿qué siente?

Me he encontrado con las víctimas en los centros comerciales y hablo normalmente con ellos.

Hablo con la verdad, mirando a los ojos. Yo, como memoria histórica del Cártel de Medellín, he pedido perdón.

¿Es verdad que Pablo iba al Carnaval de Río de Janeiro y gastaba 2 millones de dólares?

El 'Patrón' cogía su avioneta, echaba millones de dólares y lo gastaba en el Carnaval de Río de Janeiro. Gastaba a mano llena. Por eso cuando se cansó de tanto viaje, empezó la guerra. Y su placer era matar a sus enemigos. Él cargaba una libretica como la que usted tiene, oía hablar a alguien de la extradición, lo apuntaba y lo mandaba a matar.

¿Cuál es la verdad sobre la avioneta que está en la entrada de la Hacienda Nápoles?

Decían que esa avioneta fue la primera que transportó coca a Estados Unidos, eso es mentira. Esa avioneta es de entrenamiento, eso no llevó coca a ninguna parte.

¿Qué artistas llegaron a la hacienda Nápoles?

Ahí llegaban muchos artistas. En la Hacienda Nápoles estuvo ‘Chespirito’, para los cumpleaños de los hijos del Patrón, hacía shows. También llegaron Héctor Lavoe, Joe Arroyo.

¿El ‘¿Puma’, José Luis Rodríguez?

El ‘Puma’ no estuvo en la hacienda, sino en una conocida discoteca de la época, que era de un amigo narcotraficante del Patrón.

¿Es verdad que a Héctor Lavoe lo hizo cantar toda la noche a punta de balas?

Eso es mentira, el ‘Patrón’ nunca haría eso con una figura pública. Era un caballero. Tal vez pasó en otra fiesta del Cártel de Medellín.

¿Cuál fue su talón de Aquiles?

El talón de Aquiles de Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria fue su mamá, su mujer y sus hijos. Esa era una falencia del Patrón, un verdadero bandido no puede tener familia. Yo conocí un bandido muy teso (bravo), que fue Miguel Castaño Gil, él embarazaba a una mujer y la mataba porque no quería tener hijos. Es que los hijos, para un guerrero, es un lastre muy berraco.

¿Es verdad que la mamá de Pablo Escobar jugó un rol importante para él?

No, eso es mentira, totalmente. Era una mujer normalita.

¿No es como la muestran en la serie ‘El patrón del mal’?

No, cero. ¿Pegándole palmadas en la cara al Patrón? Ja, ja, ja.

Por cierto, ¿qué le pareció la serie?

La serie es buena, la hicieron con mucho esfuerzo y les salió bien. ¿Pero quiénes hacen la serie? Unas víctimas de Pablo Escobar, unos familiares del doctor Luis Carlos Galán, y del director del diario El Espectador, don Guillermo Cano. Ellos tratan de montar el mito que Pablo Escobar era muy valiente, líder. Y después muestran que la mamá le pega en la cara, ¿a qué líder su mamá le

pega en la cara? ¡Por Dios santo, bendito! El Patrón era respeto, usted le pega en la cara y se encabrona.

¿Incluso con su propia madre?

No la manda a matar, pero no le habla nunca más en su vida. En la serie muestran al patrón llorando, tirado en el suelo, pero él no lloraba. Él es el único hombre que ya rodeado por la policía y a punto de ser asesinado, no tenía miedo. Él sonreía.

¿Usted cómo se vio representado?

Yo soy rápido, hiperactivo, alegre, y el actor muy pasivo. Respeto el trabajo del actor, pero no me representó.

¿Cómo es eso que un sicario verdadero dispara de la ceja para arriba?

Mire, un sicario muy miedoso es ese que cierra los ojos y da seis balazos en el pecho. En cambio, un sicario fino es el que dispara de la ceja para arriba. El sicario profesional mata con revólver, el sicario tonto mata con pistola. El sicario fino carga una pistola para la bronca.

¿Usted carga ahora un arma?

No, ahorita no tengo, porque la libertad condicional no me lo permite.

Después de 23 años de encierro, ¿cómo se siente la libertad?

Pues, con solo abrir los ojos soy feliz. Tampoco me asusta la cárcel. Si toca, toca. Estoy feliz en la calle, pero en la cárcel también hay lo mismo que aquí.

¿Nunca le tentó traicionarlo por dinero?

Nunca, primero me hago matar. Era un amor, en el buen sentido de la palabra, increíble. El ‘Patrón’ valía 20 millones de dólares, yo pude decirle a mi mamá que lo delate, pero no lo hice.

¿Cómo se entera de la muerte de Pablo Escobar?

Yo estaba en la cárcel, me había entregado. Estaba barriendo el patio de la prisión y veo en la televisión que dice: ¡Extra!, ¡Extra!, ¡Extra! ¡Acaba de ser ejecutado Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria!

¿Qué sintió?

A mí se me enfrió el alma. Por primera vez sentí tanto miedo.

¿Lee mucho?

Sí, 'El Quijote', 'La Iliada', también leía a García Márquez.

¿Usted admira a Gabriel García Márquez?

Sí, como escritor. Pero como persona, no. García Márquez trajo razones a Latinoamérica para matar gente con la guerrilla. Él era un guerrillero. Él era un enlace del narcotráfico. Hace poco el periódico The New York Times informó que la CIA (Servicio de Inteligencia de Estados Unidos) estaba siguiendo a Gabriel García Márquez desde los años 70, por su actividad guerrillera y su amistad con Pablo Escobar.

¿Amistad? Claro. Pablo Escobar era amigo de Gabriel García Márquez. ¿Dónde se conocen? En Nicaragua, gracias a la guerrilla M-19. Tampoco voy a decir que le daba plata. Tampoco visitó la Hacienda Nápoles.

Usted dice que la presencia de Pablo Escobar sigue marcando su existencia, ¿cómo?

Todo el día hablo de él, porque realmente más importante que yo, es él. Yo llegué a ser general del ejército de Pablo Escobar. Él era muy poderoso, muy inteligente, muy guapo y rico. Pero le cuento una cosa, los que salían a matar éramos nosotros.

¿Por qué siente admiración por él?

Porque fue muy bueno conmigo, muy sencillo. Yo recuerdo que una vez, en un operativo, cuando íbamos a matar a una mujer, salí herido. El 'Patrón' me dio su avioneta y fue a visitarme. Entonces ya no tenía un patrón, sino un amigo. Siempre fue bueno, respetuoso.

¿No tiene remordimiento por las personas que mató?

No, ¿sabe por qué? Porque estaba en una guerra. Estaba defendiendo una bandera, en esa guerra me mataron a la familia, amigos, jefes.

Era una guerra sin sentido...

Sin sentido, pero era una guerra.

¿Cómo debería recordar el mundo a Pablo Escobar?

A él hay que recordarlo como lo que fue, un narcotraficante, un terrorista, un secuestrador y extorsionador, pero que trató de ayudar a la gente, regaló casas, canchas de fútbol. Fue un guerrero, un hombre que venció al Estado. Es el único bandido en el mundo que se enfrentó a la Policía Nacional y mató a 540 policías.

Usted habla de eso como si fuese una hazaña, pero no lo fue.

Oiga, no es fácil enfrentarse a la policía...

Es que no hay que enfrentar a la policía...

Fue un gran error, pero ellos mataron jóvenes en el barrio pensando que eran sicarios.

¿Qué tan importante fue Perú para él?

Sin el Perú, él no habría sido grande, porque él empezó a traer pasta de coca del Perú en avionetas.

¿Quiénes le vendían?

Traficantes de medio pelo. Pero el Patrón sí tenía contacto con Sendero Luminoso. No es que compartían la ideología, pero fue por la droga.

¿De qué año me habla?

Cuando empieza a traer la pasta de coca hablo del año 81, 82, 83. El Patrón hablaba de ellos.

¿Mencionó nombres?

No, ninguno. Solo Sendero Luminoso.

En Perú y Latinoamérica ha crecido demasiado el sicariato, ¿por qué?

Mire, le digo, el padre del sicariato es la extorsión y el narcotráfico. Después viene el secuestro. Están a punto de volverse una epidemia como en México o como en los tiempos de Pablo Escobar. Nosotros secuestramos media Colombia. La sociedad peruana se va a ir degradando cada vez más.

¿Cómo detenerlo?

Hay que fortalecer la justicia, hay que llevar equipos de alta tecnología, intervenir los teléfonos, los WhatsApp. Debe existir mucha inteligencia en las calles, tener redes de informantes. Hay que hacer unas leyes extraordinarias para detener a los sicarios. Y lo más importante, que el Estado haga presencia en los barrios pobres, que lleven deporte, cultura. Tiene que intervenir en los barrios, pero amablemente. Además, debe tener a la policía bien pagada.

¿Qué les aconseja a los muchachos que se está iniciando en este oficio?

Mi consejo para los sicarios, que están matando a sus hermanos peruanos, es que busquen un nuevo norte en la vida. El sicario siempre tiene tres puertas: la cárcel, el hospital y el cementerio. La justicia siempre prevalecerá sobre el mal. Hay que buscar una vida limpia, honesta, humilde. Lo que lleva a uno a meterse en esto es la ambición.

¿Usted cree en Dios? Totalmente, cien por ciento.

‘Popeye’, cuando usted muera, ¿adónde cree que irá?

Escrito está en la Biblia. Dice que si uno se arrepiente, es totalmente salvo. Yo iré a la diestra de Dios, iré al cielo