

Wake Up, Medellín, Wake Up!

Ever since the mythical, sinister years of Pablo Escobar, something has been changing in Medellín. A guided tour through its seductive streets and its neighborhoods, which are discretely divided into the city's six social classes, allow a visitor to encounter the front-page headline of the local newspaper proclaiming, like an incantation, "Medellín, 53 hours without a murder," as well as a Museum of Memory, and a series of optimistic proposals intended to frighten away violence and give the city signs of life. One arrives at a city through its people and its landscape: I return to Medellín after almost four years and can no longer recognize myself in either one or the other. At one point, my visits were so frequent that it seems strange now to return and note the passage of time in the streets, in the center of town, in buildings that have grown both taller and more sophisticated, in a certain cleanliness in the air that goes beyond the cloudy skies and the eternal spring.



Chapo

Alfredo Srur, *Geovany no quiere ser Rambo*

One breathes something different in this city, which in the 1980s, during those mythical and sinister years of Pablo Escobar and his enemies, was demon violence incarnate. Cold statistics say that the murder rate has gone up in the past two years, but only in the comunas, the neighborhoods visible from all over the city on the slopes of the Valle de Aburrá, above which the Metrocable's ultramodern cable cars navigate in mid-air. One takes these to hilltops where enormous libraries and cultural centers were built as monuments to progress amid the city's poor inhabitants, who are still witnesses to mass killings, shoot-outs, and fear. It is difficult to apprehend a city that's divided into wealthy neighborhoods, such as El Poblado, where there are almost no murders, and others where bodies were once again fed into the white vans of the city morgue every night, as was the case in 2010. These were exhausting workdays for forensic experts, who, just as in the old days, did not know where to put so many dead youths. In the latest edition of *El Colombiano* you can read: "Medellín, 53 hours without a murder." It was signed by a reporter on the police beat, one of those veterans eager to work near the morgue and who sometimes, when everything else collapses, helps arrange into rows the bodies waiting

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in vain for an autopsy.

How It Was

I first came to Colombia eight years ago. I was working at *TXT* magazine and had been in the north of Argentina for months investigating a gang of criminals and cops who were kidnapers, the sort that abducted the family members of celebrities—among them the father-in-law of the Argentine entertainer Susana Giménez. The kids were nervous because the news broke too soon on TV, and things started falling apart when the Buenos Aires police force could no longer provide them with protection. After that, threats were made to the source we had found in neighborhoods and shantytowns. At home, threatening calls came in by phone. On one day, unusual for me, I got a splitting headache. It didn't go away after taking an aspirin. Nor did it the following day, or the one after that. And so on and so on, driving me mad, for more than twenty days, for all of December. Sometimes in the middle of the night a source would call swearing he was about to be shot by armed men standing at the door to his house. And then silence. The doctor diagnosed stress and my analyst recommended a month's vacation. My friend Ricardo had a house by the sea in Cartagena at the time, and I was welcome there. The Lacanian analyst said: "Isn't there any place other than Colombia?" And I promised her I'd only set foot on the Caribbean coast, that I'd forget about the comunas, the neighborhoods, the gangs, or the hit men. Fifteen days later, strong-armed by my friend, a lover of Medellín, I found myself in the Picacho comuna, where he'd been making videos with young people who had taken part in the bloodbath when Medellín was the most violent city in the world.

So I fell in love with the city despite my stress, my doctor's advice, the violence, and its bad reputation. And I returned many times that year, maybe four or five times, I can't remember. I left journalism for a while; I devoted myself to organizing a megalomaniacal event with a Colombian artist from Antioquia, Juan Fernando Ospina. We began with a pair of Argentine artists showing their work in Medellín and wound up with sixty-nine artists and performers, including the bands Fernández Fierro and Bajofondo Tango Club. In 2004, the great decline in violence still hadn't begun and a terrible fear persisted: the tango orchestras would be playing for the first time since the street bombings occurred in what had been known as Tangovía, a street closed off for the milonga in the greatest city for dancing the tango after Buenos Aires. There were four thousand people that evening, four thousand with eyes welling up to the sound of "Trenzas," while a group of children from the Manrique neighborhood danced for the crowd among the bandoneons. It all turned out well, except for the financial ruin we were led into by our Roman excess, our intoxicated youth. After that I visited less frequently, but I came whenever I could.

How It Will Be

Now, on this visit, I begin to harvest what was planted back then. I take part, for the first time, in the city's Book Festival, which has brought almost seventy foreign writers to the Botanical

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Gardens, perhaps the most luxuriantly green of them all. Last Saturday, the great newspaper writer Alma Guillermoprieto and I talked and disagreed about what it means to be an “urban war correspondent.” And despite not being entirely sure, because we’ve only recently arrived and because we are outsiders, we agree that there is a perceptible change beyond any statistic: Medellín is waking up.

So says a recent column by the journalist and writer Patricia Nieto:

To think against the darkness, it must be that an overpowering energy is emanating from the 2.3 million residents of Medellín. I see them cooking arepas at dawn, pedaling down the streets in a race against the sun; I hear them criticizing their flawed city; I see them alert, confident that in the possibility of a future. These days they’re talking about the bridge on 4South that will be 560 meters long, uniting southwest and southeast: monumental, they say. But the bridge is much more than numbers, it is a connection between two fragments of Medellín separated not only by the river, but also by inequity. The same expansive tone can be detected in the descriptions of expansiveness of the ten new parks and libraries as well as the nineteen top-quality schools that have been built with public funds in the past seven years, and of the Good Start program that takes care of 90% of the children in social strata one, two, and three.

In a society as class-conscious as Colombia’s, there are six strata: from the poorest, number one, to the millionaire, number six. I had no sooner arrived in the city that I learned of dozens of cultural and social initiatives in the comunas, of poets, videomakers and theater people, of games for children, and of schools, almost all of them in the “lowest social strata.” One of the most impressive, I’m told, is the Good Start program, which has 15 childcare centers with dazzling buildings and impeccable playrooms, and specially trained teachers to insure that children between the ages of one and five will grow up nurtured, fed, and taken care of within the protection and creativity in each neighborhood. It was the idea of the city’s departing mayor, Alonso Salazar, who wrote the canonical book about violence in Latin America, *No nacimos pa’ semilla*. In these pieces from the 1980s, Salazar recounts the life of kids with no future, the ones who would be killed like flies when fierce gunfire broke out. Salazar smiles as he walks through the book fair, which is being held these days in his city’s enormous garden, and he offers a greeting as he passes by, well-loved and proud, though he won’t be running for office again. He leaves behind extraordinary public works that had been initiated by his predecessor, Sergio Fardo, who came from the same progressive alliance, and bequeaths a politics of social and cultural development that would be the envy of any other Latin American city with fewer dead and more pretensions.

I’m staying in Medellín for a week because I’m coordinating a workshop for journalists, students and experts who are working alongside victims of the violence afflicted and continues to afflict the city; the workshop is called “Memories of the Violence.” The debate has started at such a high level that the ethical dilemma of depicting victims and victimizers bursts forth at every moment in the stories that each of the local participants brings to the table. This, the

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recovery of memory so as not to repeat the past—as Theodor Adorno states—is a process that was delayed, and that Salazar, in a way, has left in place. A year ago, work began on the design of the Museum of Memory, a space that will avoid being a site for visits and weeping, but that will instead travel the city in search of the memory that seethes beneath the urban skin of this valley. What is memory in this infernal paradise, where the daily struggle to survive and change exists side by side with criminal gangs composed of what was left after the paramilitaries were demobilized in 2003? I'll visit those corners of contemporary hope, those “ugly” stories. I want to know more about Medellín: I'll never tire of her.

Translated by Margaret B. Carson