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On the Other Side: Photography as Literary Device of Magical Realism

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A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude (García Márquez, 1982).

In July 2014, I met the representatives of the NGO Acción Ecológica in Quito, the capital of Ecuador. In that meeting I was told about all the problems that affect the border towns between Ecuador and Colombia in the rainforest. The most important ones being: poverty, environmental disasters and the oblivion to these issues of both governments. I was instantly interested because of my desire to photograph the “lost person” and the “lost place”, themes that are recurrent in my photographic practice. The NGO’s representatives agreed to help me with their contacts on the condition of me giving them the photographs I would take.

One week after the meeting, I embarked on a 10-hour bus ride to Puerto Nuevo, which is a small village of around 500 inhabitants located on the banks of the San Miguel River, on the Ecuadorian side of the border. Colombians fleeing armed conflict in the south of their country founded this town in 2001. My contact there was a Spanish doctor collaborating with the NGO. She introduced me to Don Juan, the president of the village, and his family, and to other inhabitants.

In the beginning, I was not sure about what I was doing in this place. The poverty in the town was evident but the other problems were not. At the same time, Puerto Nuevo was the most boring place on earth. At first sight, that village seems to stand still in time and nothing special was going on. Interviewing Don Juan did not help; after my sleepless night in the bus, he talked with me for three hours about the problems that affect Puerto Nuevo. I knew of all these issues already because the NGO representatives had informed me of them before going, but it seemed he needed someone to listen to him. It was not going to be easy to narrate all these issues with images.
After the interview I decided that the project would be called *Al otro lado*, which in Spanish means *On the other side*. This is how everybody here refers to their homeland and to the place they currently live in. However, this was the only clear thing on my mind so I decided to take a walk around the village and think what the story would be about. One of my first photographs was a shot of colourful clothes hanging on a light blue wooden wall. As soon as the NGO doctor saw me, she asked why I was taking a picture of such a beautiful thing in this town. A passage of an interview with Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez in the New York Times, came to mind: ‘In my case, it always begins with an image, not an idea or a concept. [...] Then the image grows in my head until the whole story takes shape as it might in real life.’ (Simons, 1988). So I thought I might try to apply this idea on visual storytelling as well. This first image was the guide for the pictures to come and I understood that my project would be a bright-coloured story to denounce neglect and oblivion.

The images I recorded in Puerto Nuevo take the viewer on a deep journey into the village. During the days I spent there, I became another inhabitant of the town. People not only let me into their houses but also in their lives. These pictures tell the story of people who have fled conflict and live in poverty. They are not narrated in a literal way. They are not concrete, nor objective. They may be subject to interpretation and multiple readings. Just like a literary work.

Susan Sontag, in her collection of essays *On Photography* affirms, that photography has a dual power: to generate documents and create works of art. She also claims that photography is a language with which it is possible to write scientific postulates and bureaucratic reports, but also novels and poems. (Sontag, 1979, p. 148) I agree with this statement, as I believe that, in a way, my work has to do with visual prose. In that sense, my aim is not to teach an absolute truth through my images; I am subjectively interpreting reality. As a fellow photographer once told me: ‘we lie in order to tell the truth’. And as García Márquez states:

> My misfortune is that people don’t believe my journalism. They think I make it all up. But I promise you, I invent nothing either in journalism or fiction. [...] Journalism and literature were almost joined. I have never been able to completely separate them (Simons, 1988).
Sometimes, because of the colours, light and the situations depicted, my pictures do not look real enough. When taking a photograph, I intend them to have an aesthetic component, although this may seem inappropriate to critics who support the “inauthenticity of the beautiful” statement (Sischy, 1991). They believe that in order to be “truthful” the photography of pain has to lack beauty. For instance, Sontag argues in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* that the aesthetic component makes these pictures play the role of a “spectacle” (Sontag, 2003, p.77). Nonetheless, I believe that a neat style can be compatible with visual storytelling.

Humans are visual organisms. Sight is one of our most important senses. In the distant past it was our main tool to find food and stay alive. We remain instinctively more attracted to fruits with bright colours. The same happens with images: we are more likely to look at a beautiful picture rather than uncanny images depicting horror. If the viewer spends more time looking at a beautiful picture and thinking about the situation in which this was taken, rather than rapidly flipping through images to avoid pain, then this is a victory for the narrator. In that context, I agree with what photographer Richard Mosse explains in an interview while talking about his film installation *The enclave* (2013): ‘Of primal importance to me is beauty. Beauty is one of the main lines to make people feel something. It’s the sharpest tool in the box. And if you are trying people to feel something, if you are able to make it beautiful then they’ll sit up and listen’ (*Richard Mosse: The impossible image*, 2013).

As a photographer, I am interested in picturing the how and not the what. In order to do that, I tend to look for colours and light, even in darkness. Images that may somehow transcend the usual literal depiction, which often befalls mainstream photojournalism. My aim is not to change the world; as a matter of fact, I am convinced that photography cannot do it on its own. My goal is to come to another level of image representation while giving the viewer the highest amount of information possible. My aim is to tell stories and document issues that may otherwise go unnoticed and if the images I take, make the viewer think about that particular problem, then I will have achieved something. My main tactic consists of using aesthetically rewarding images in order to hook the viewer to the story. This is why I totally agree with photographer Simon Norfolk when he argues:
By making the pictures very beautiful you're almost tricked into coming inside that photograph’s space for a while and engaging with it and beginning a conversation with the photograph. Then, by surprise, you might find that you’ve listened to a whole load of my arguments, which you probably wouldn’t have bothered to listen to if I hadn’t seduced you into that space, into that dialogue. (*Burke + Norfolk: Photographs From The War In Afghanistan, 2011*).

But the beauty I am talking about is not the superficial stereotype. I try to go deeper and broaden the panorama, not being afraid of talking about dignity and human strength while making beautiful pictures.

While participating in a workshop with photo editor Mike Davis, he advised me to 'look for the light, to map the light and to shoot the light' (Davis, 2013). Since then, I have been doing this and have been trying to apply the same formula to colour. This motto has been overwhelmingly relevant in my work as a photographer and this series is no exception. I am very careful in my choice of the time of day I shoot at. I always try to photograph when the light is right, avoiding the midday sun which in Ecuador can be especially harsh. During my stay in the village, I used to wake up early in the morning and shoot outside for a couple of hours. At midday I preferred to visit somebody indoors and, when the sun began to set, I used to go into the streets again to keep photographing. I tend to take a lot of pictures; sometimes, I feel as if my sweat is present in the images, because I make every effort to get the perfect one.

This body of work is rather detached and unsentimental. The gaze is directed towards the banality of the everyday life with no fear of picturing the unpleasant. Taking this into account, I realised that my work could be part of an art genre that started with painting and became known first as Post-Expressionism and later, Magical Realism. Austrian art critic Wieland Schmied summarized the main aspects of this stream as follows:

1. Sobriety and sharp focus: an unsentimental and unemotional vision.
2. The artist’s vision is directed towards the everyday, banal, insignificant subjects; the absence of timidity with regard to painting the unpleasant.

3. A static, tightly unified structure, which often suggests a completely airless, glass-like space, which, in general, gives preference to the static rather than to the dynamic.

4. The eradication of the traces of the painting process, the liberation of the painting from all signs of the handicraft.


These characteristics can be applied to my work, because the sobriety, the banality and the static subject are present in my photographs. Besides, some images also neglect the impeccable photographic technique and others delve into details, establishing some kind of relationship with the objects. Although Magical Realism was born in the Weimar Republic, it is Latin America that has been most recognized for the development of this genre, especially in literature. This reinforces the idea of labelling my work within this style.

Figure I: Vallejo, M., 2014. Untitled, from the series Al otro lado. [photograph].

As mentioned above, the majority of the photographs in this series are static. There is no action going on, but there is a tense feeling that something is about to happen. In these images, time stands still but the viewer still feels the village’s movement around (see Figure II). Somehow this effect takes us back to the
narrative style of Magical Realism, where time is not constant: it can move faster or slower than in reality. After “reading” the whole book, the viewer is not expected to know whether this story took place in just one day or in several years.

![Untitled, from the series Al otro lado](image)

Figure II: Vallejo, M., 2014. *Untitled, from the series Al otro lado.* [photograph].

Most of the pictures in this body of work are multi-layered: they depict the obvious item but there is also something hidden behind it. They are meant to act as adjectives or adverbs, not as substantives or verbs. Besides, some of the photographs are so close to the subject that it makes the background disappear. I was asked by a tutor why there weren’t many wide shots in the series. My answer was that I had always used the same approach that consists in going as close as possible to the subject with no intention of being invisible (see Figure III), as I didn’t want this work to be about a specific place: it is an example of what happens in the majority of villages along the border between both countries. Getting closer, disregarding the background, making the context disappear, is a photographic method that raises more questions than answers. This may not be perceived as a documentary method, but its main goal is to engage with the viewer in a more active way, making him render in his head the part of the image that is not in the frame.
These are quiet pictures of loud environments where the solitude of the individuals plays an important role. They are loaded with such a large amount of visual information, that it is sometimes difficult to interpret. These images need time to be processed by the viewer (see Figure IV).

A similar approach is discussed in Fredric Jameson’s essay On Magic Realism in Film. Here, he analyses several Latin American films, which use the same cold, detailed, close focus approach of Magical Realist painting. Also he notes the ‘close-
ups on objects, might indicate a magic realist interest in the qualities of the object (see Figure V), the so called *increased objectivity* (Jameson, 1986, p. 301).

Figure V: Vallejo, M., 2014. *Untitled, from the series Al otro lado.* [photograph].

It might well be thought that Magical Realism is not the appropriate way to document a real life issue, as it is a subjective style that combines reality and fiction. However, this genre does not brush away the authenticity of the story: it is just a code. As literary critic Angel Flores explains:

Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures (...) [the Magical Realists] don’t create imaginary worlds in which we can hide from reality. In Magical Realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p.121).

The journalist and writer Gabriel García Márquez, (mentioned earlier) who is also the most noticeable representative of the literary Magical Realist stream, documented through his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) a historical event that was not recorded in the books of History. In one of the passages of this novel, García Márquez tells the story of a massacre that happened in Colombia at the beginning of last century. In 1928, the workers from the United Fruit Company organized a month-long strike to secure better working conditions. The United
States Government threatened to invade the country if the Colombian authorities did not act to protect this company's interests. It was then when the Conservative’s government sent the army, who killed all the strikers to end the problem. This story was known in the local communities but never included in any official archive, as it was an episode of Colombian history, which made the country feel ashamed. When García Márquez decided to depict a fictional version of this event in his novel, he was documenting history. Since the publication of that novel, this sad chapter in Colombian history has now been recorded in official documents. García Márquez’s work is a piece of art, but also an encoded document to a hidden reality.

My work in Puerto Nuevo produced more than 6,000 photographs. I always prefer to have a lot of material from which to choose from, but this hinders the editing process. Editing the work proved to be one of the most difficult tasks because it took a lot of time, effort and emotions. In the process of choosing the pictures, I asked myself which were the most mysterious ones. 'I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descent to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it' (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p.16). I agree with Zamora and Faris, I really believe that the mystery is always there. This is why I chose the photographs that force the viewers to use their imagination. After having selected around 400 working images, they were printed and the manual process of sequencing them began. First, I had to decide which the main topics were that I wanted to talk about and after trying many different approaches, I decided to split the work into five different parts. Each part begins and ends with an image of the San Miguel River - the same river that both unites and separates towns along the border. The first section starts at the time cocks crow each morning, the villagers awake and the first boats arrive in Puerto Nuevo. In the second, the viewer is introduced to Don Juan’s family. The next part depicts the first generation of children born in the village. Afterwards, the story of another family is shown and the journey finishes in the town at night. The whole story does not end with the river. Instead it finishes with a photograph that may be interpreted as a personal opinion of the situation in the town (see Figure VI).
This project is complex and due to the lack of a linear narrative, I decided to present it as a book. It is an intimate portrayal of a small community lost in the jungle. They have been affected by tabloid reporters, who have come to the village only when they run out of news to fill their papers. I thought that Puerto Nuevo deserves a more dignified place than a hidden page in some sensationalist newspaper and a book, usually considered a valuable object, could be appropriate. Besides, the viewer is intended to spend a fair amount of time looking at the images in order to understand the whole scene, and therefore, developing this project as a fast moving multimedia piece would not have worked. Also, a book is one of the most democratic ways of showing photography because of its relatively low cost production compared to photographic prints or films.

One of the first ideas regarding the editing of the book was to make it broad. A tight edit would have meant that the position of the narrator would be very concrete and narrow. During the process of editing I was trying to make sure the story would have some kind of rhythm. I am a firm believer that in order to retain the viewer’s attention, the sequencing of the story should not be predictable. According to Josh Lustig, ‘[w]hen sequencing a story you have to think as if you are directing an orchestra, you have to think about the rhythm’ (Lustig, 2014). For the sequencing of this particular story I thought that the most convenient rhythm would be based on Latin Jazz, since this is a music genre that combines lively music with sad lyrics and where you can never be sure what rhythm variation will come
next. Here, the viewer will not know for sure what kind of picture will come after he turns the page: a wide shot, a portrait or a detail. This is why during the editing process, many good pictures were not taken into account: they were not working in the sequence.

Another structural decision was taken during the editing process regarding horizontal and vertical pictures: while the horizontalss would be alone in each page’s spread, the verticals would come as a pair. This meant that it was very important to find the right pair of vertical pictures. In order to do that, one of the principles followed was finding a pair of images that were similar in form but contradictory in substance. For example, a picture of a man with a chainsaw that looks as if he was glued to the background was paired with an image of a shirt with a woman's face pasted on it, as shown in figures VI and VII.


The other approach used was pairing two images that were reaffirming each other. An example of this can be seen in Figures IX and X.
The last days of my trip I remembered an advice I got a long time ago: a photographer has to be a collector, a collector of memories and things. So I started to collect items that caught my eye, like torn apart playing cards, Colombian beer caps, or broken toys. Each chapter of the book has a visual prologue that consists of these objects on a white background. They have a direct relationship with the full bleed photographs that follow. Sometimes these relationships are very obvious (for example old photographs of the villagers portrayed later in the series) and sometimes the relationships are subtler, (like toys, documents or religious figures that hint of the theme of the next chapter).

Together with these visual prologues a strove of the poem Note XXII by Argentinian writer Juan Gelman is also included. In this poem, the author, who was a campaigner in guerrilla organizations during the Argentine dictatorship, talks about the pain of exile.
The small size of the book makes it more personal: the viewer will have to get closer to look at the photographs and, in this way can get closer to this village. The presentation of full bleed pictures is meant to fetishize what is inside the pictures and not the images themselves so that the viewer will be immersed in this overwhelming narrative.

This is a dense picture story presented without captions. “A picture is better than a thousand words” is a common cliché in this image driven world. Also, as Sontag notes in her book *On Photography*:

> The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: ‘there is the surface. Now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.’ Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy (Sontag, 1979, p. 23).

This is the main reason I decided not to include any specific captions under the photographs. I believe that when a picture is described, the magic vanishes and it turns into a joke whose punch phrase has to be explained. García Márquez was also noted for leaving out seemingly important details and events in his stories, so that the reader is forced into a more participatory role in the development of the narrative. For example, in *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961), the main characters are not given names. This practice is influenced by Greek tragedies, such as *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*, in which important events occur off-stage. As this body of work does not impose a judgemental attitude towards either its realist or magical aspects, it allows itself to be open to multiple interpretations. The viewer is in charge of connecting the dots and decoding the narrative.

When developing work in your home country, it is more likely to get emotionally attached to the project. But from time to time, it is necessary to distance yourself in order to see the issues with a foreign perspective. This thought made me think about how Latin America is portrayed throughout the world. This continent, together with Africa, are places that most of the times have been victimized by westerners. We are always depicted as the poor underdeveloped world that has little control over its destiny. With these pictures I try to recover the dignity of people. I do tell about the problems here, but that's not the only thing that
exists. I try to go deeper and make intimate portraits and highlight the beautiful things that do exist in our life, which is not a constant suffering.

Also, it seems that every story about Latin America is either sensationalist or romantic. As Flores explains: ‘One can survey the works of one novelist after another with the same result: that in Latin America, Romanticism and Realism seem bound together in one afflatus’ (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p.110). This body of work tries to avoid both of these approaches. As mentioned above, it is unsentimental. It is not what the viewer is used to see, these are not typical pictures of suffering from Latin America as they try to challenge people’s expectations about a certain place with certain people. Without being naïve, I think that these are pictures of people trying to make their best out of the situation they had to live in.

I agree with Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, when he affirms that ‘the notion of Magical Realism is an essential aspect to Latin America’ (Bowers, 2004, p. 114). For instance, a man was killed at the end of my stay in Puerto Nuevo. I decided not to attend the visitation because I did not know him and I thought it could be inappropriate to show up there. When I told this to a villager, she thought I was afraid that the deceased would wake up as soon as he heard the shutter of the camera because he would confuse that sound with the gunshot that killed him. She meant it seriously. In Latin America, ‘the co-presence of oddities, the interaction of the bizarre with the entirely ordinary, the doubleness of conceptual codes, the irreducibly hybrid nature of experience strikes the mind’s eye. Impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open in the middle of the midday sun’ (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 210).

As Gabriel García Márquez points out, ‘one doesn’t choose the style. You can investigate and try to discover what the best style would be for a theme. But the style is determined by the subject, by the mood of the times. If you try to use something that is not suitable, it just won’t work. [...] I only respond to our way of life’ (Simons, 1988). This is precisely what I tried to do with Al otro lado, respond to the magic and bizarre situations that happen all the time in the rural regions of Latin America. I tried to capture these moments with a tool that may not be suited for this: photography. From the beginning of its history, photography was seen as an objectivemethod of copying reality, as ‘The pencil of nature’ (1844), like Fox
Talbot called it. But I agree with what photographer Tom Hunter said during a lecture at the London College of Communication on October 29th 2014: ‘Photography is not important, it is a tool to talk about the world around you. Nowadays people believe a photograph is truth. The same happened with painting in the past’ (Hunter, 2014). The same as any pencil, photography can be controlled by the hand and the eye of the storyteller or artist. I think the most important tool of a photographer, besides the camera, is his honesty and integrity. Honesty in the sense of making it clear that what the photographer records is totally subjective.

Some time ago, when I was still a teenager, I wrote in my diary that I have an inexplicable fear of being forgotten. As a grown up photographer, I still feel the same and this is why I make every effort to associate my work with beauty and art. I want my photographs to last through time and, with them, the people portrayed there will be remembered. ‘Get the reality and the beauty. The context is loose because time erases it. In the future people will only talk about colours, composition and so on’ (Hunter, 2014). As Hunter, I believe that the images that will remain will be the ones that have an aesthetic component.

This is a strange kind of beauty and it can be seen throughout the whole series of pictures. It challenges the viewer’s perception of Puerto Nuevo and its people. It is hard to get rid of our prejudices and clichés and this body of work is trying to do just that. ‘In the real world, something is happening and none knows what is going to happen. In the image-world it has happened and it will forever’ (Sontag, 1979, p.168). This is why I try to depict this region’s fascinating colours and light, even if it seems unreal or too beautiful for pictures of pain.

This critical report was a complicated task but it helped me realise what kind of photographer and storyteller I am. Analysing my own work was not easy; the hardest part was to abstract myself and look at the project with fresh eyes. During this process I came to the conclusion that my work is deeply influenced by painting and literature. This was a worthy exercise because I believe it is important to understand what kind of stories I will tell in the future.

When García Márquez won the Nobel Prize in 1982, he gave a speech called The solitude of Latin America. The writer then said that the reality of this continent marks the people who were born there. Maybe this is why my photographs are full
of ‘sorrow and beauty’ (García Márquez, 1982). Somehow, I tried to give back the lost dignity to those portrayed in my pictures. I tried to give them a voice and find some magic in their reality.
Bibliography


