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Universidad de Guadalajara

# Pictures that come from the past. The photographs of the so-called concentration camps of the war in Colombia

*Imágenes que vienen del pasado. Las fotografías de los llamados campos de concentración de la guerra en Colombia*

JORGE IVÁN BONILLA VÉLEZ[1]
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2883-1418

*This paper examines the photographs denominated by the media and sectors of public opinion as "the FARC concentration camps" in Colombia. These pictures were used as analogies of Nazi concentration camps. They were first published in October 2000 and regarded as "templates" of unforgivable horror. The reflection propounds how the media's narratives and images represent vehicles that are capable of guiding the memory not only of the past, but that of the present and the future.*
KEYWORDS: *Photography, memory, concentration camps, war, Colombia*.

Este artículo examina las fotografías que los medios de comunicación y sectores de opinión denominaron "los campos de concentración de las FARC" en Colombia. Utilizadas como analogías de los campos de concentración nazis, estas imágenes, publicadas por primera vez en octubre de 2000, se erigieron en "plantillas" del horror imperdonable. La reflexión plantea cómo las narrativas y las imágenes de los medios se constituyen en vehículos con capacidad para orientar la memoria no solo del pasado, sino del presente y el futuro.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Fotografía, memoria, campos de concentración, guerra, Colombia.

[1] Universidad EAFIT, Colombia.
E-mail: jbonilla@eafit.edu.co
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> And photographs echo photographs: it was inevitable that the photographs of emaciated Bosnian prisoners at Omarska, the Serb death camp created in northern Bosnia in 1992, would recall the photographs taken in the Nazi death camps in 1945.
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> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others*.

## Introduction

At the beginning of October 2000, a considerable number of Colombian newspapers, magazines and television news programs published a set of images showing a group of policemen and soldiers posing in front of the camera, behind a fence secured with barbed wire that surrounded the camp where they had been confined by the guerrilla of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia).[2] Initially displayed as proof of survival, these images soon acquired a greater connotation: they constituted a testimony of the existence of "concentration camps", this guerrilla had installed in the southern jungles of the country, an analogy attended too by journalists, government officials and press commentators, in order to associate the memory of an event of the past –the genocide of Jews in the death camps of Nazism– with the cruelty

[2] The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia –also known as People's Army or FARC-EP–, was the oldest guerrilla in the American continent. It emerged in 1964 as a peasant self-defense movement that vindicated the access to land and the disestablishmentarian struggle. It was later transformed into an armed organization with presence in most of the national territory. The period in which these images were taken corresponds to one of utmost military predominance of this guerrilla, in its attempt to transform the armed struggle from guerrilla warfare into a territorial battle, which became in turn an intensified bellicose confrontation with the Colombian military and police forces. After 52 years of armed insurrection and three failed peace processes (1984-1985; 1992; 1999-2002), the FARC signed peace with the government of President Juan Manuel Santos in October 2016, after four years of negotiations in Havana, Cuba. In June 2017, they ceased to exist as an armed organization. See: Grupo de Memoria Histórica (2013), Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas (2015).

of an event of the present (the captivity of members of the police force who were held by FARC).

These images of soldiers and police officers behind the fence invite us to think about how often we have seen them before. They bring back some scenes captured by reporters who accompanied the Allied troops during the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps at the end of the Second World War, whose visual memory has become a prism through which other cases of extermination, genocide, state terrorism and fratricidal violence are usually interpreted (Campbell, 2002b; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010; Novick, 2000; Zelizer, 1998). As affirmed by Huyssen (2002), the fact that the Holocaust has become "a universal tropes of historical trauma" in modern societies has to do with the fact that this –along with its images, memories, discourses and testimonies– is considered not only to be an index of a specific historical event that took place in a society and a specific time, but as an extensive metaphor that is used to understand traumatic experiences and memory practices transferred to local contexts, distant temporalities and different situations with respect to the original event (p. 18).

The constitution of Nazi death camps as a reference point for contemporary atrocity, also means that their images, stories and testimonies are not only reappropriated as authentic evidence of what happened there, but superimposed on other crises and tragedies, in an exercise of moral equivalence in which this, the Holocaust, becomes a lesson to prevent disasters to come (Dean, 2004); a framework to establish how cruelty will be remembered (Brink, 2000; Pollock, 2012; Zelizer, 1998); a retrospective "template" to frame later events (Kitzinger, 2000); an occasion to examine the survival of the image, and, therefore, reconsider the visual memory of horror through this means (Didi-Huberman, 2004; Garcia & Longoni, 2013); or an icon of the globalized and mediated memory of current societies (Levi & Sznaider, 2005). Because, as Peter Novick says, as the Holocaust is turned into an emblematic atrocity, does it mean that this is the criterion by which we decide what horrors grab our attention? (2000, p. 257).

This paper examines the photographs denominated by the media and sectors of public opinion in Colombia "the FARC concentration camps". A term that is used to hint at the inhuman conditions policemen

and soldiers captured in combat were subject to. Prisoners were used not only to exhibit military power and territorial dominion of the guerrilla, but also to obtain recognition of its belligerent status (Aguilera, 2013; Pizarro, 2011) and put pressure on President Andrés Pastrana's administration (1998-2002) in order to implement a humanitarian accord, at a time when the escalation of armed confrontation in the country ran parallel to the degradation of warfare practices by various actors involved; guerrillas, paramilitary forces, drug traffickers and state forces (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

The writing states that the analogy of German concentration camps used by the Colombian press to account for the captivity conditions of policemen and soldiers was proffered as a "template" of the unforgivable horror that was used to anchor a ruthless episode of the present to a historical memory of atrocity, a cross-link where images assisted in framing the observation, narration and conceptualization of the aforementioned episode. In the end, this piece of work offers some reflections for further research that delve into the way Colombians have regarded (or stopped doing so) the abominations of our war, which is in the process of being overcome, thanks to the peace accord signed between the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC.[3]

## Icons of atrocity: Memory and visual recycling

One of the most eloquent reuses of Holocaust templates concerning warfare in Colombia is one that dates back to 2000, after journalist Jorge Enrique Botero traveled to the southern jungles of the country to document the captivity conditions of a group of 261 members of Police

[3] At the time of this writing, this guerrilla's process of laying down their weapons before UN delegates had been completed but their return to civilian life was kept in suspense. In addition to this, the transitional justice system –Special Justice for Peace– created to judge crimes committed by all actors of the inner armed conflict (Including the FARC), had not yet begun to be implemented.

and Armed Forces, whom the FARC had captured in combat, after a series of consecutive attacks and military operations against military bases, telecommunications stations, army patrols and police stations in the departments of Nariño, Putumayo, Caquetá, Guaviare, Meta and Vaupes during the second half of the nineties, specifically between 1996 and 1999.[4] On this journey, Botero visited the camps where policemen and soldiers held by the FARC remained for years, at a time when the prospect of a humanitarian accord that would allow their exchange for imprisoned FARC members retained in a number of prisons throughout the country was beginning to shake. All of this, within the framework of a failed peace process led by President Andrés Pastrana. This is the

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4 Acts of war that granted the FARC important military triumphs against the Colombian police and armed forces. These began with the attack on the *Las Delicias* military base, located in the municipality of Puerto Leguizamo, Putumayo, on August 30, 1996, where 27 soldiers were killed and another 60 were held until June 1997, when they were released to a commission of the International Red Cross in the Department of Caquetá. This was followed by several more acts of war: the take-over of Cerro Patascoy, standing on the border between Nariño and Putumayo, where 18 soldiers were captured on December 21, 1997; the confrontation with army units in the *El Billar* ravine, in the rural area of Cartagena del Chaira, Caquetá, where 61 soldiers died and 43 others were detained on March 1, 1998; the attack on facilities where both, an anti-narcotics base of the National Police and an army battalion operated in the municipality of Miraflores, Guaviare, where 73 soldiers and 56 members of the Police force were captured on August 3, 1998; the take-over of Mitu, capital of the department of Vaupes, where 61 members of the Police Force, including regular and auxiliary police officers, were taken hostage on November 1, 1998; and the attack on the Police Station of the municipality of Puerto Rico, Meta, where the FARC detained 28 policemen on July 10, 1999; among others. The majority of the military and police hostages from these armed incursions were released in June 2001, in the midst of the failed peace process between the administration of President Pastrana and the FARC. The latter released 250 police officers and privates, but kept 54 officers and non-commissioned officers (32 of the Army and 22 of the Police Force).

context in which the journalist carried out the television report he called *En el verde mar del olvido* (Botero & Osma, 2000).[5] It lasted of thirty minutes of duration that begins with the chronicle of the reporter of his trip to Jungle; continue with the dramatic scenes of the captivity of the police and military, the meeting they held with Marleny Orjuela and Luz Amparo Rico, relatives of two of the detained uniformed, who traveled with Botero carrying messages, photos and letters from their relatives.

The report continues with some interviews done with the military and policemen who spoke to the journalist about their days in the jungle, their suffering and the helpless they feel regarding the government. The reporter then finishes with an interview with the FARC'S commander at the time, Jorge Briceño, aka "*Mono Jojoy*", whom the report also shows at an impromptu "meeting" with members of the public force who would ask him questions about their captivity conditions. Expected to be air in the time slot of 23:30 on Wednesday, October 4, 2000, on *Caracol* channel. The report didn't end up being aired due to pressure on the part of the Government and The National Television Commission, CNTV, which intervened before the channel's director so that it was not broadcasted. As stated on a letter written by the President of the Board of Directors of CNTV at the time, Ricardo Lombana, who claimed patriotic reasons he defended with the following words:

> The letter reads that the country has been exposed during the last few weeks to the recurring display of soldiers' images, which, without a doubt, portrays a violation of International Humanitarian Law. Those images showing the misfortune of some people and the exaltation of pain will affect population sectors such as children ... The letter was more of a reflection than anything else, since the images of violence and conflict need to be handled with an illustrative criterion rather than with commercial appetite ("La carta de la CNTV", 2000).

The reasons given by the CNTV to ban this report which were, on the one hand, that it violated the human dignity of the soldiers and

5 The full report can be consulted at the following electronic address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UV33PeL51ik

on the other that it affected the children's feelings, wound up going the opposite way. The reason for this was the fact that although the report was not ultimately aired, some of its fragmented images, edited by the reporter himself (as an advance of what viewers were about to witness hours later) were broadcasted on the 12:30 and 19:00 news that same Wednesday. And, what were people going to witness but the powerful images of "FARC concentration camps" in the jungles of the country. Although the predominant narrative of the report pointed in another direction: one that exposed the oblivion these men faced due to the government's apathy and the indifference of the FARC, this was soon replaced by the camps' horror, which was precisely the expression with which the national government, the media and some political commentators reacted, giving credit to the dramatic scenes that revealed the captivity conditions of the policemen and soldiers who took part in the television report.

The reactions were swift and here's an example of that. The *El Tiempo* newspaper, claimed on an editorial entitled "*Estado Farco-Nazi*" that:

> The images in the video have as a background, the unacceptable pretension of the FARC (proclaimed by "Mono Jojoy") to become another State ... This outburst is not only rejected by the opinion of the overwhelming majority of the Nation but by domestic law, international jurisprudence and the most basic common sense. More so, when that supposed state has such terrifying similarities with what the Nazi wanted to impose on the world half a century ago ("Estado Farco-Nazi", 2008).

On the other hand, the press columnist Roberto Posada García-Peña –D'Artagnan– stated the following concerning the shocking existence of such images:

> Not even in Nazi Germany were there such terrifying scenes of what constitute actual concentration camps, duly secured –oh yes– by hostile barbed wire fences from which no one can escape. Contrary to what happens every day in our high security prisons (D'Artagnan, 2000, pp 1-19).

From that moment, comparisons and visual/discursive recurrences associating these images with Nazi practices began to circulate not only as a true value –the visual and testimonial proof that the uniformed hostages were alive and clamored for a humanitarian accord–, but as a symbolic force: the captivity conditions of Public Force members became a symbol the FARC's infamy. This is why it was necessary to turn to the recycled use of existing images and strong remembrance in the archives of collective memory (mediatized and globalized).

Is this not what can be perceived in the following cover of the *El Tiempo* newspaper ("Así están los soldados secuestrados", 2000, p. 1) (Figure 1) and in the successive images (Figures 3, 4 and 5) showing a group of policemen and soldiers behind a surrounding barbed wire fence at the FARC camps where they were held captive? Where have we seen them before? There is a photograph by the famous graphic reporter Margaret Bourke-White that invites us to appeal to memory. It is a black-and-white photo taken in April 1945 on the Buchenwald field, where the photo traveled to, accompanying the US troops in their victorious raid into German territory, at the end of World War II, as part of the documentary strategy undertaken by the Allies to demonstrate that the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi were not fabricated stories (Campbell, 2002a; Linfield, 2010). Titled *The Living Dead at Buchenwald, April 1945*, the photo portrayed a group of surviving Jewish men, perhaps twenty, posing before the lens of the reporter's camera as they stood behind the barbed wire. This is an iconic photograph of the concentration camps' liberation that has traveled to our days, and of which, historian Theodore M. Brown said in 1973:

> … is surely the best of the thousands of Goyaesque images made of death camps. Stitched across the picture surface, the menacing barbed wire establishes a distinct separation of viewer and prisoners … The picture remains a lasting testimony to the kind of hell-on-earth that only humans can create (Brown, cited in Campbell, 2002a, p. 4).

Much like this one, there are other images that were taken by different reporters and soldiers during the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, in January 1945, in which groups of Jews are shown in

similar compositions, all in bad conditions, posing behind the barbed wire fences (unlike the previous one, which only included men, these include women and children). The same that have been used to encompass the general narrative of Nazi barbarism, which unlike the aforementioned photo by Bourke-White, owes its iconicity to silent allusion, considering that on the one hand they are images with little referential information since their very provenance, and on the other, that the identities of both the photographer and the photographed are unknown, thus highlighting their symbolic character: that of being icons of atrocity (Zelizer, 1998, pp. 86-140).

But, why do we say an image can be iconic? Cultural historian Brink states that the term "icon" is frequently used without a notion of what is transformed, for example, a photograph into an icon (Brink, 2000, p. 136). In her analysis of some photographs of the Nazi concentration camps' liberation, Brink argues that, while these pictures are not icons in the strict sense of the word, they are regarded as if they were because of their highly emotional impact and their great symbolization power (p. 141). Therefore, Brink proposes to relate this concept to its historical framework and to religious images of Christian orthodoxy in order to find analogies there could be between the images of the present and those that come to us from other times of history (pp. 139-142). An analogy –between a photo and an icon– that, according to her, may seem odd since this relationship is established in political, academic and cultural contexts as opposed to the religious one, in which cult figures were first conceived (p. 142). Brink gets back to the term "secular icons", coined by Photography Historian Vicki Goldberg, as a way to refer to those images that aside from inspiring some degree of amazement, fear and compassion, "stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs" by permeating common symbolic overtones and larger frames of reference that endow them with national or worldwide significance (Goldberg, 1991, p. 135). "They concentrate the hopes and fears of millions and provide an instant and effortless connection to some deeply meaningful moment in history"; consequently, "they seem to summarize such complex phenomena as the powers of the human spirit or of universal destruction" (p. 135).

In her book *Remembering to forget. Holocaust memory through the camera's eye* (1998), renown visual theorist Zelizer states that the concentration camps' photographs played a key role, not only because they provided proof of the barbarism committed by the Nazi, but because they were recognized for a broader cultural meaning that went beyond its mere referential function: they became universal symbols of atrocity, which produced a considerable impact on people, who were exposed to these images and appropriated them (pp. 86-140). In this context, Zelizer points out, the Holocaust memory usually operates as a retrospective event, a backdrop that previews photographs of potential atrocities soon to be reported by the media. Atrocity memories are cued and articulated at least in three different ways. The first is through the words that guide us through the images. The second is through the use of parallels in the images that relate to the initial event, or that highlight it, by virtue of their familiar and repeated aesthetics. And the third is through a pattern of substitutional representation –not just visual, but verbal and written– that extend from the powerful iconicity of the "original" event to the present, eliminating the gap between yesterday and today, in a memory game in which the present extends and vanishes in the past and vice versa (Zelizer, 1998, pp. 221-226).

The first of these uses (Figure 2), in which words guide the reader through the images, is reflected in the following editorial of *El Espectador,* published on October 9, 2000, about the captivity conditions of soldiers and policemen in the hands of the FARC. Titled "Los campos de concentración de las FARC", the editorial highlights the disbelief of witnessing an unpublished episode of the Colombian civil war, which exceeded the limits of what is known and was roughly comparable to places where extreme cruelty was enacted by Nazism:

> The whole country was saddened by the raw images broadcasted on *Caracol* Channel of concentration camps the FARC have in the middle of the jungle, to confine soldiers and policemen captured in combat. It is extremely painful to observe the unjust immobility situation to which they are subject by a subversive group that abrogates the power to imprison public servants, whose only fault was to fulfill their duty of protecting society. The episode recalls the nefarious epochs of Nazism and the most recent case of Serbia.

> Certainly, the qualifiers of "monsters", of "infamy" and "indignity" (with which senior state leaders referred to this relatively unknown side of our war) reflect the ignominy of a group that does not respect any sort of right or feeling.
>
> This new drama our people face today underlines the fact that the limit between the reality and fantasy in Colombia is increasingly blurred ("Los campos de concentración", 2000, p. 2A).

What could be said about the other two uses of memory of the *death camps* –parallel images and substitutional representations– to refer to the aforementioned episode? In Figure 3, there´s a photo published by *El Tiempo* on October 11, 2000, where we can see an upright man in a military suit holding a rifle on his shoulder, staring straight across at an undefined spot. In front of him, five men pose locked inside a raised mesh with awning and wire. Four of them are watching him, paying attention (one of them is barely visible), while the fifth one, at the far right of the box, directs his gaze at the same place the man outside the fence is focused on. The caption indicates that the man in the medium-wide shot is "Granobles", brother of "Mono Jojoy", and that the others are the soldiers and policemen who remain captive by the FARC. The text ends by stating "the conditions in which they were displayed, sparked rejection, because they resemble the concentration camps of World War II" ("Se agita el tema del canje", 2000, pp. 1-2).

In the other two images (Figures 4 and 5) something similar can be observed. In one of them, published by *El Espectador* on October 10, 2000, we see the blurred profiles of several men who remain standing, all of them behind a wire fence, and where even the spikes and fabric representing their enclosure stand out ("Canje vuelve al Congreso", 2000, p. 3A). As for the other photo, published by *El Colombiano*, the caption reiterates once again what the first one read: "Different sectors denominated as a concentration camp, the place where soldiers and policemen remain sequestered by the FARC" ("Abandonados a su suerte", 2000, p. 3A). The vague figures of several men with their worn-out clothes, and shaved heads are visible as the camera gets closer to them –they have suffered captivity for a few years–.

These are not original photographs, but captures of a video screen they were taken from. Each one of them corresponds to different fragments –these are frozen clips– of a more extensive narrative sequence that runs through the aforementioned television report about the policemen and soldiers in their captivity scenario. Hence the image's scarce sharpness and the sense of uniqueness inspired by the moment shown there. It is a reminder of the words the eighteenth-century German writer, Lessing (1960), used in his essay about a sculpture of Laocoonte and his children, being attacked by two marine snakes, where he argued that a painting –a photograph in our case–, "that is meant to represent coexistence, can only choose a single moment of the action and this must, therefore, be the most fertile one, the one that best reproduces the previous and posterior instant" (p. 100). Because it is the photo where soldiers and policemen are shown behind the fence, it is precisely that same frozen moment of the action (paused at the utmost dramatic point of an event), the one that transports us to the memory of the camps, in a journey that does not only take place because these images relive the threatening "aesthetic" of the Jews' extermination in the camps, but because they allow the media and journalists to comprise acts of contemporary cruelty in conjunction –and superposition– with those brought back from an atrocious past (Zelizer, 1998, pp. 220-238).

These templates of the German concentration camps will not be limited to a relation with the episode of the above-mentioned captivity situation, as they will surface again in an attempt to narrate later events, considering they are used as a backdrop for special reports and documentaries, or as a reference to explain other events concerning armed conflict in the country. One example of their resurgence is found in a report by journalist Diana Carolina Duran published by the *El Espectador* newspaper on July 6, 2008, four days after 'Operación Jaque' the military operation executed by the Colombian Army to rescue fifteen hostages held by the FARC, including political leader Ingrid Betancourt (kidnapped in March 2002), three US contractors for the Colombian army (kidnapped in March 2003), seven soldiers and four policemen (captured in combat after guerrilla attacks on the towns of La Uribe, Miraflores, Mitú and El Billar, between 1998 and 1999) on July 2 of that year.

The report, titled "Dejando esos campos atrás" makes an explicit comparison between the experience suffered by Italian writer Primo Levi, Auschwitz survivor, and the suffering endured by Colombian hostages in the jungles of the country.[6] From beginning to end, the writing establishes the similarity between both situations, between both times of history and between the genocide of the past and the cruelty of the present:

> "We realize for the first time that our there are no words in our language that can express this offense ... as miserable a condition as this one does not exist, and it cannot be imagined". The Italian writer Primo Levi tried to convey with these lines all the horror Jews endured when they were confined in the concentration camps set by the Germans during the Second World War.
>
> However, testimonies like this and that of many other survivors of Jewish extermination were not enough to prevent concentration camps from continuing to transform into realities, at least in Colombia. Letters sent from the jungle have shown this for years. Statements from men such as the Colombian Foreign Minister Fernando Araujo and police officer Frank Pinchao also prove it too. And now, after the rescue of Ingrid Betancourt, the three Americans and the 11 members of the Police force, it becomes evident that this is a topic that cannot be forgotten.
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> The writer Primo Levi recalled in his book *If this is a man*, one of his most recognized works for his testimonial value on Auschwitz, the "discomfort, the blows, the cold, the thirst and the uncertainty of tomorrow" that him and millions of Jews endured in their years of confinement. To the sequestered people, Levi's sentences were not far from reality.

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6 In January 2008, the then Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez (2002-2010) traveled to Paris to meet with President Nicolas Sarkozy in order to manage the issues pertaining to a humanitarian exchange with the FARC that was being studied at the time, which would translate into Ingrid Betancourt's return to freedom. In one of his statements to French *Europe 1* radio program, President Uribe insisted that FARC hostages were suffering "as much as the Jews in Hitler's concentration camps". See: "Uribe recibió apoyo de Sarkozy" (2008).

> "Mono Jojoy arrived at the camp about 15 days after the capture. He told us we were there for a swap, but that, in case a fight arose, they would not let us live", declared Sergeant Romero to *El Espectador* upon his first talk with the media ...
>
> Levi stated that the Germans had forbidden them to touch or sit on the bunks. In the Colombian case, there were no bunk beds at all. The beds were either wooden planks or the floor itself, in cases where they were forced to improvise a bed for the night. Their blanket was a cover they had from the beginning of their captivity, but that was not enough to repel the cold of the jungle or the attack of mosquitoes or tabanos.
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> "There were many *chuchas mantequeras* [wild possums] and snakes there. I used to have to put my boots down upright so that animals would not get in ...", says Corporal José Miguel Arteaga.
>
> Guerrilla members could be very cruel if they felt like it. Hostages say that men like *alias Gafas*, one of the insurgents detained in 'Operación Jaque', forced them to be chained for 24 hours ... The concentration camps ended for these men in 2004. But not because the guerrilla wanted it that way, but due to the execution of *Plan Patriota* (Durán, 2008, pp. 22-23).

The report is illustrated with two photographs. One of them (Figure 6) relives an episode from October 2000, when the nation first saw the dramatic images of policemen and soldiers taken by the FARC. In the photographs, it is possible to see the full body profile of journalist Jorge Enrique Botero, right across from where these men remained confined: "the Colombian concentration camps", as can be seen in the caption[7] (Duran, 2008, pp. 22-23). Getting back to Zelizer, it is the words that provide images with a known context, and it is both words and the images that invite the reader to associate these two events that are distant in time and in the magnitude of its effects (the Nazi annihilation

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7 This same photo will reappear years later, in August 2013, illustrating another report on the cruelty inflicted by the FARC during the times in which they practiced the kidnapping, this time prepared by the journalist Juan David Laverde. Titled "El infierno de las Farc", the caption says: "The journalist Jorge Enrique Botero document infrahuman conditions in which the FARC keep the kidnapped 'exchangeable'" (*El Espectador*, August 17, 2013).

enterprise that resulted in the ethnic cleansing of an immense population, on the one hand, and the capture of armed force members along with the kidnapping of civilians as a despicable act of war and a display of inhumane blackmail methods aimed at achieving political ends, on the other), in a combination of actors, facts, times and situations that leads us to wonder what kind of interpretations are created when we approach a story that refers to another one, with a monumental emotional charge? Because through an alignment of both Atrocities, is it not the memory of the Holocaust, the one that ends up shaping the determining basis for judgment on human cruelty, in this case, the cruelty of the FARC?

## Politics of imagery and "media templates"

So, the fact that the dissemination of dramatic images extracted from excerpts of Jorge Enrique Botero's report were in the public interest and caught the attention of politicians, journalists and commentators, who did not hesitate to describe them as "repugnant", "terrifying", "infamous" and "indolent", raises an interesting thought about the reactions they sparked, at least amongst members of the media, as it's already been pointed out. Paraphrasing Sontag, the possibility that an image alone could provoke a particular reaction where there isn't a political space per se that would allow that, is not only exaggerated, but naive, since it is politics –and not just of the photo– what gives images a voice, a name, what provides them with a channel for action (Sontag, 1996, p. 28; 2003, pp. 18-20). However, at this point, it would be worth asking: Did these images, of soldiers and policemen held captive by the FARC have anything to convey aside from being a visual record, an accompaniment of the media's verbal accounts and written reports. In order to address this question it is necessary to go back to some ideas outlined by Zelizer (1998) regarding the visual memory of the Second World War. For her, the most obvious consequence of resorting to a series of visual –and verbal– familiar statements of the atrocious past of a society (concentration camps, Holocaust) applied to new contexts of atrocity, has to do with the fact that this reduces the resonance of the original term and denies the complexity of the new event to which the term refers, because although the continuous references

to the past of barbarism serve to maintain it in the collective thinking, it can also abate it by confusing representation with responsibility (pp. 213-239).

Why? Because unlike the initial concentration camps' photos, for example, contemporary representations of horror unfold around a type of media that circulates within a context that differs from that of a past where such kind of depraved violence was almost unheard of. That is why, according to Zelizer, an iconic image such as the photograph taken by Margaret Bourke-White of the Jewish prisoners behind the Buchenwald fence in April 1945 now fits easily into a narrative the viewer recognizes and is so used to that it could almost lead him to indifference, considering that the more familiar we are with the images of atrocity the weaker our ethical and moral responses to the situation that produces them are (Zelizer, 1998, pp. 213-220).

Zelizer's thesis (1998), is that our moral habituation to violence can result from an excessive use of images of atrocity that neutralizes potential responses: we see more, yet we do less. For her, this recycling of photos from the past has a major consequence: not only does it dull our response to them but it potentially undermines the immediacy and depth of our response to contemporary instances of brutality, discounting them as somehow known to us. In a dynamic of memory in which aesthetics of early representations is reproduced leaving out collective action's emphasis, implied in the initial photographs (pp. 202-210). So, much like Zelizer, when faced with images of the prison camps of Omarska and Trnopolje, back in Bosnia in 1992, or when we witness those of soldiers and policemen in Colombia –both of which bring back the memory of the Holocaust– we are invoking affairs of the past instead of responding to situations of the present.[8]

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8 Recently Zelizer (2016) has focused his analysis on the way in which American journalism has responded to the terrorism of the Islamic State by going back to the deep memory of the Cold War, an issue that has led the media in that country to use a series of narrative patterns –the images included–, codes of informative conduct and ideological and cultural frameworks coming from the coverage of the so-called "invisible war" between the two world powers, the United States and the former Soviet Union.

Precisely in *Sobre la fotografía* (1996), Sontag, one of the most diligent intellectuals in sustaining a critical attitude towards images, insisted that the repeated exhibition of pain photographs has done more to anesthetize consciences than to awaken them, provided "the shock of the photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings" (p. 30). Sontag warned that when viewers face images of painful events with a strong emotional charge, they usually follow the path that leads from disturbance to fascination, then to custom and finally to indifference or impotence. An issue that points to the "appearance of participation" (p. 20) that encourages photography, a situation that, on the one hand, makes it possible for an event known through images to acquire more reality than it would have dreamed, and on the other, causes an opposite effect: from so much reiteration, that event wears off, loses reality, ceases to be authentic (pp. 20-21).

To ask, therefore, whether constantly repeated images of captivity conditions of soldiers and policemen held by the FARC revived something more than an event of contemporary memory, is a relevant inquiry. This is precisely what the academic Kitzinger (2000) refers to in her work, about how some episodes of the past survive their original existence and become a kind of *litany* that gives way to narratives, images and debates on current issues. Kitzinger broaches the concept of *media templates*, a term that refers to the ways in which some emblematic events of yesterday are used by the media and journalists as a "rhetorical shorthand" that allows them to provide new stories with sense and guide public discussion not only about the past, but about the present and the future, which, in turn, has repercussions in the public sphere and in the ways in which events will be remembered, for how long and for what purposes (p. 61).

For Kitzinger the *media templates* are key events with a useful life that extends beyond their termination; in fact, she says, these are characterized by a retrospective use given that when the templates appropriate an event, they acquire continuity after the situations that have occurred, are used to compare, explain and offer irrefutable evidence of the events in progress, allowing journalists, editorialists and commentators to anchor the primary meaning to an event or take it for granted, before it is subject to multiple interpretations (p. 76). These

operate as "molds" rather than as "windows", with which the media usually establishes the unbreakable course of events, offering the public analogies, suppositions or conclusions with the minimum of analysis (Beacons, p. 78).

Resorting to the *media templates* notion is appropriate because it also leads to a warning historians give: that the records of past events are not harmless memory dynamics, because, as Burke (2000) points out, "these records are not innocent concretions of memories, but rather attempts to persuade, to shape the memory of others" (p. 70). An issue that is relevant to the so-called "FARC concentration camps", for at least two reasons that could guide future research on the subject. In the first place, it is necessary to remember that although the initial framework of Botero's report invited to exercise *dominant reading* (Morley, 1996) that was linked to the understandings proposed by the FARC, which fostered the military power of this armed organization, the provision of evidence of soldiers' survival and that in turn, would urge the government of President Pastrana (1998-2002) to carry out a political accord for a humanitarian exchange. These pictures left the code initially established by the report –showing the captivity conditions and abandonment of policemen and soldiers– and ended up being part of a circuit of production and circulation of information, opinions and images in which, as we have seen, the disgust inspired by these inhumane war practices was evidently exhibited through the visual and informative schemes of journalists, commentators and the media.

As a result, the old reference of the Holocaust as a way to define a monumental genocide of historical character that is related to a local confrontation, does not necessarily follow the guidelines proposed by Zelizer: remembering an event of the past in order to forget an event of the present, thus losing our ability to respond (Zelizer, 1998, p. 221). This recycled use of the camps' history could be interpreted as part of a narrative process of great significance on the representation of atrocity in Colombia. Although this atrocity did not begin with the episodes analyzed here, these have helped to reinforce it through an

account of kidnapping[9] that has contributed to emphasize the idea of the dehumanization by the FARC and, therefore, to build a representation of their commanders, which are in turn assimilated, to a bloody history of war criminals that is not an insignificant fact when it comes to thinking about how Colombians will remember barbarism, to reconsider what kind of horror called our attention more, in detriment of others less remembered and more trivialized, or to reflect on the role these images had in what historian and media analyst López calls "the patriotic narratives of hatred" (López, 2014).

In the second place, these images allude to a relatively unfamiliar episode within the practices of atrocity in Colombia. Going back to the words of the aforementioned *El Espectador's* editorial ("FARC's concentration camps", 2008), what struck it was the "new drama" exhibited by the images of soldiers and policemen held by the FARC, the line between "reality and fantasy" we were transported to by these scenes. Because by revealing the incredible character of the event, the images of these camps pointed to a kind of unknown template of evil, at least in Colombia: these were forged in previously unseen evidence of infamy, which is why, their comparison with the Holocaust became a determining statement on the cruelty of the FARC. Hence their terrifying character and constant reiteration as symbolic markers of atrocity. The unprecedented aspect of the images of soldiers and policemen held by the FARC was precisely the possibility of comparing their iconography with that of the Nazi concentration camps, that episode of history considered to be the manifestation of "radical evil" (Arendt, 2012).

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9 We refer to a criminal practice that, much like that of kidnapping, has been documented not only by images or reports of state institutions, NGOs or the media, but by the book industry. The same that through first-hand accounts of the hostages who fled, were liberated by the FARC or rescued by the military forces, configured a sort of testimonial genre about kidnapping, with a strong inclination towards the detail of experiences and the intimate truth of the story. A narrative whose examination in the academic field has revolved more around the analytical "quality" and the literary "invoice" of testimonial genre rather than its repercussions in the recent memory of the country, around the drama of war, the ways in which tragedy will be remembered.

## In conclusion

The importance of going back to an episode like the one examined here, lies in the fact that when it comes to studying the media and the memory, the duty to remember, debate and clarify, to review them and watch for unnoticed or disregarded aspects, also implies it would be done through images (Huyssen, 2009). Referencing a ubiquitous past of great significance in order to channel episodes of the present and capitalize on the human drama is something that speaks to us about how narratives and images of the media act as vehicles with the capacity to guide the memory not only of the past, but also of the present and the future (Schudson, 2014).

In our case, we will have to study the impact this way of framing barbaric episodes of our internal war had: whether they disavowed a public response to it, fomented hatred towards the FARC, or were part of a favorable political space to say *no to war!* But, above all, we must think of ways to develop dignifying ways of representing our recent past, now that the country is trying to move forward in a different route.

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