

Your blood is our blood

The metaphorical extensions of 'Lucho' Herrera's glory

Nicolás Llano Linares

A PhD Student of the Communication Sciences program at São Paulo University (Brazil). His research interests include food and material culture, media discourses and critical explorations of visual culture. He is one of the organizers of Antropologia & Comunicação (2014), a book presenting a collection of papers presented at the IX International Seminar of Image Culture – Cultural Images.

Abstract:

On July 12 of 1985 at Saint-Étienne, France, Luis Alberto 'Lucho' Herrera, the first Colombian cyclist to have won a Tour de France stage (1984), became an international hero and a national martyr. Not only did the image of Herrera's bloodied face staring at the horizon after winning the 14th stage acquire cult status within cycling circles around the world, it also established a subtle, yet passionate, connection between the figure, his performance, and Colombian reality. We argue that Herrera's image worked as a metaphorical extension that stimulated the association between Herrera's martyred image and the collective struggle people had to go through on a daily basis, accentuating the strongly Catholic iconographic dimension attached to popular sport practices in Colombia (faith, endurance, and suffering). Using applied elements of Charles S. Peirce's semiotic apparatus, this paper analyze three symbolic elements embedded in Herrera's image – blood, struggle, and redemption – to discuss the photograph's power to resonate with the average Colombian at a time when *narco* terrorism ruled most of the territory and the escalation of insurgency and paramilitary violence were daily occurrences.

Keywords Colombia, Cycling, Tour de France, Martyrdom, Violence

Every country has its own set of cultural icons: visual documents of specific events or figures that encapsulate and define important historical phases for different generations, integrating a variety of meanings into different dimensions of the country's social and cultural life. On July 12 of 1985 at Saint-Étienne, France, Luis Alberto 'Lucho' Herrera, the first Colombian cyclist to have won a Tour de France stage (1984), became an international hero and a national martyr. Having outstripped the main peloton and riding in front with 5km to the finish line, Herrera tried to avoid a spot of mud on a closed curve and skidded. He fell hard and cut his forehead and elbow. The fall was not caught on tape, as the filming cars were following the main pack and the race leader, Bernard Hinault (who also fell that day), and so all that remains are the pictures and footage of Herrera's face covered in rivulets of blood crossing the finish line and standing on the podium.

In Herrera's victory, a team effort and an individual achievement, Colombians saw their life stories and their country's destiny reflected. Among the thousands of gruesome and horrific images that exist as documents of the extended agony of Colombia's inner conflict, few have had the power to resonate so strongly with the average Colombian as 'Lucho' Herrera's bloodied face at the finish line of that stage; and although this paper is by no means trying to compare the suffering of thousands of victims of an extremely complex and horrific historical process to the suffering of an individual athlete, we argue that blood was such an ubiquitous element of the nation's psyche and reality at that time, that the association, a metaphorical and emotional one, was almost inevitable. Why did an image produced in an opposite social dimension generate that type of associations? For Matt Rendell, the embedment of Catholic culture in sporting practices in Colombia holds the key to understanding the massive response to the image:

The sentimental cast of its Catholicism and the morbid tendency of its national character found their supreme expressions in cycling. In Lucho's tiny physique, bloody features and tortured victory, Colombia saw itself reflected more faithfully than ever. Over the following months new

waves of violence and tragedy hit Colombia, and the image assumed lasting pathos as a generalized picture of its suffering (Rendell 2002, 179).

Catholicism has been a defining guide in the constitution of many of the national attitudes towards the psychological effects the country's violence has had on the lives of millions of victims. In a country with an immense income inequality gap, where different types of violence became rooted in quotidian life and *trivialized* to a certain degree (Pécaut 1999), religion has often been seen as the only resource to comprehend and deal with the feeling of living in a place without salvation; as Matt Rendell comments: '(...) proximity to poverty's degree zero must draw us closer to the realm of miracles - the Sacred Heart of Christ has offered Colombia's poor their only protection for nearly two centuries' (2002, 31). What at first glance could be seen as a paradox – the fact that Herrera's image represents a sporting landmark for the country and yet some of the meanings and emotional undertones attached to it reflect the cruel reality of a nation immersed in a gruelling armed conflict – is upon closer inspection a characteristic trait of the nation's history and psyche.

Three elements – blood, struggle and redemption – appear to have grown out of the picture frame and echo feelings not only about the inseparable trinity of cycling, Catholicism, and Colombia (Rendell 2002), and also mirror grander narrative themes attached to Colombia's history: violence, negotiation of national identity, and the ever present hope of redemption. It is within this dialogical framework that I use Charles S. Peirce's semiotic apparatus, since his theory allows applied analyses to observe signs to play different 'roles' at once, letting the same sign represent different objects depending on the relation between the constitutive elements of the sign or in relation to other signs (Peirce 2008; Nôth 1995). The triadic structure of the *semiosis* process (production of meaning), and the further phenomenological categories he developed are helpful especially because my hypothesis is grounded in triadic structures as well. Since this reading of Herrera's image is focused on the metaphoric extension of the icon, Peirce's theory provides a valuable hermeneutic due to the stress he places on the iconic character of the metaphorical sign.

Colombians' love for cycling has a long history. Velocipedes arrived in 1894 and by 1899 more than 600 bicycles were cruising around Bogotá. In 1898, two cycling tracks were inaugurated before packed audiences. News and commentaries about the Tour de L'Avenir and the Tour de France were common topics of conversation at the beginning of the XX century (Revista Credencial Historia 2005). During the following decades, amateur cycling competitions were part of the so-called 'rediscovery of Colombia', a process that intended to unite and strengthen political institutions in disregarded parts of the national geography under a progressive political banner. It was not until 1951, when the first edition of The *Vuelta a Colombia* took place that cycling cemented its position as Colombia's national sport. The competition was organized by the *El Tiempo* newspaper and "the political and economic elite with a keen awareness of cycling's value as political theater of national unity during the 1950s" (Cycling Inquisition 2010, 2). The competition, now in its 64th edition, has often been staged against a backdrop of politically-driven terror, national identity fragmentation, and extreme violence.

Cycling and the macro socio-political context of Colombia's reality have long been entangled: the establishment of the nation's major cycling competitions (*Vuelta a Colombia* and the *Clásico RCN*) coincided with the outbreak of the *La Violencia* period in the 1950s, and decades later, the booming of the 1980s generation that paved Colombia's path in the international cycling circuit was set against the expansion of guerrilla and paramilitary armies, drug violence, and the rise of *narco* culture. Among all the great riders that the generation of the 1970s and 1980s gave to the history of Colombian cycling¹, Luis Alberto 'Lucho' Herrera is without a doubt the most important one. He was the first Latin-American to ever win a Tour de France Stage – the mythical Alpe D'Huez in 1984 in his first year riding the most important cycling race in the world – winner of the King of the Mountains jersey in all three major cycling competitions (Tour de France, Giro de Italia, Vuelta a España), winner of the 1987 Vuelta a España and the Vuelta a Aragón (1992) and a two time champion of the Dauphiné Liberé. And that is without listing his numerous victories on the Colombian cycling circuit.

Blood, struggle, and redemption

Herrera's most striking feature were the rivulets of blood pouring down the left side of his face all the way to his chin; an image that rapidly fixed in Colombia's popular consciousness. His blood expanded its meaning from that of an indexical manifestation of a common occurrence in a sporting practice, to assume the role of a metaphorical substitute in a broader "domain of experience" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 117): Colombia's national conflict². For many, the blood streaming from Herrera's wounds was not only his, and not only a result of his accident, but a recurring element linked to the nation's reality, an element that radicalized the violent meanings attached to it. At the time of the event, blood was a key component of a shared visual vocabulary for the vast majority of the nation; and although Herrera's blood was the product of a sporting competition and carried positive (euphoric) meanings, the metaphorical association to Colombia's gory reality was, sadly, inevitable: "this was a time when on a national scale the distance between metaphorical martyrdom on the soccer field or on the bicycle and literal martyrdom of life on the streets or in the countryside was often non-existent" (Cycling Inquisition 2012, 2).

During the earlier part of the 1980s, the intensification of Colombia's violent conflict was rapidly becoming the fundamental trait of the national image produced by media discourses (Bonilla and Tamayo 2007). Blood was everywhere: on the streets, rural fields, papers and television screens. In general terms, the decade saw the rise of the drug empires and their *narco* culture, a shift from a "drug bonanza to a drug war" (Bushnell 1993, 259), the escalation and rural expansion of left-wing guerrilla insurgency, the birth of paramilitary movements, and a massive increase in terrorist acts and practices linked to the State-declared war against drug trafficking. All this took place while the country's political, social and cultural institutions were trying to assert their roles in marginalized regions and execute national political control (Semana 2008). Although the 1980s were defined by the intensification of Colombia's conflict, blood has always played a part of the official discourse and has been a constitutive part of symbolic signs regarding Colombia's national identity. Since its creation in 1807 by Francisco Miranda, Colombia's flag has maintained its three colours: yellow, symbolizing the richness of its land, blue representing the two coasts –Caribbean and pacific – that

delimit its territory, and red standing as the allegorical representation of the blood shed by the independence leaders on the battlefield. The institutionalization of these symbolic meanings attached to the chromatic elements is telling from a national identity perspective: “blessed” with an amazing variety of geographical, biological and natural resources, the history of the nation’s freedom and redemption has been inseparable from violent struggle.

Formerly known as the country of the ‘bleeding heart’, the relationship between cycling and religion has also been a long-lasting and steady affair. Although from the 1990s on the expansion of religious diversity has been a nationwide phenomenon³, Catholicism was and still is the majoritarian religion in the country, and continues to hold an important yet diminished influence in its political and social organization (Cely 2013). The Catholic influence is extremely apparent among professional and amateur cyclists who are often avid followers of Catholic doctrine and dedicated adorers of its saints and virgins, celebrating their faith by wearing scapulars, making and paying promises in the name of their figure of preference (Rendell 2000).

The attachment Colombians feel to “tortured, agonising religious images whom Colombia turn in its time of need” (Rendell 2002, 125) such as The Fallen Lord of Monserrate and The Miraculous Christ of Buga, illustrate how pain, struggle, and abstinence are intrinsic and even necessary features of both the nation’s destiny and its cycling culture. If these two religious images are dripping blood and showing signs of struggle – just as Herrera was depicted in the photographs – it is only natural that the cyclists acknowledge and relate to the tribulations they went through. After all, cycling can be seen as a self-imposed sacrifice, a spiritual journey. Roland Barthes’ commentaries about the dialectic relation between the Tour de France and the Iliad are magnified under the scope of Colombia’s geography (Barthes 1997). Cycling appears as the ultimate spiritual journey, one motivated by the need to overcome the immense power of nature and expose human limitations, a quest filled with pain and obstacles to surmount.

Running parallel to the Catholic beliefs concerning pain, struggle, and redemption is the belief that the escalation of Colombia’s inner conflict in the last 60 years is not the result of a series of historical processes but rather an inevitable component of Colombia’s destiny,

one that has been cursed with abnegation and struggle as its leading threads. The struggle many Colombians have to go through on a daily basis – specially those living in distant regions of the country or involved in manual and rural labour, and for whom Catholic devotion constitutes a major part of their individual and national identity – was reflected in Herrera's background as a gardener in a small rural town and in the spectacular unfolding of the Tour de France stage. At his arrival at the finish line, Herrera's expression seemed to go beyond the recognizable expression of exhaustion after a competition; although there is a suggestion of joy in his facial expression, a feeling of satisfaction for having endured the necessary sacrifice seems to prevail over other physical and emotional manifestations of his triumph. If iconicity is based on facts of experience as Lakoff and Johnson demonstrated in their seminal *Metaphor we live by* (2003), we could argue that by 1985, a significant part of Colombia's population had been influenced or affected –directly or undirected– by the country's armed conflict, constituting a common 'domain of experience' for the Colombian nation.

For Herrera, a devoted Catholic, accepting pain and overcoming the unexpected difficulties along the treacherous road was a non-negotiable condition on the path to salvation⁴. Herrera's bloodied face and the facial expression he made arriving at the finishing line (arms held high) strengthened the air of martyrdom the Colombian public attached to the victory and the image. The media's portrait of Herrera's triumph reflected this perception. Two of Colombia's major newspapers reinforced the blood and the sacrifice as key signs for understanding its importance. *El Tiempo*: 'Blood, sweat... and glory' (Clopatofski and Ruíz 1985, 1AB); *El Espectador*: 'Lucho' won with blood! (Mendoza 1985, 1C); for Klaus Bellón, a Colombian cycling and cultural commentator,

This gruesome image sent the Colombian press into a state of delirium. Herrera was portrayed as a martyr, a hero, and his stage victory was used to explain that pain was a necessary part of the sport. The press, rightfully, zeroed in on the fact that the image, and what it represented, was almost tailor-made for Colombia's Catholic faithful. His win as his *Via Crucis*, the Latin term for the Stations of the Cross. He was compared to a bloodied, fallen Christ fig-

ure. And with that, Herrera was elevated to the status of religious icon. We, the Colombian fans, were quickly indoctrinated into the notion that pain was a necessary ingredient in the sport of cycling (Bellón 2014, 2).

Concluding remarks

What started as a hopeful decade turned out to be one of the most conflictive and violently spectacular decades of the nation's recent history; a fact that contributed to the establishment of a continuum of violent associations that deepened the metaphorical extensions of Herrera's bloody victory. Just as with other national or international sporting landmarks⁵, Luis Herrera's triumph was received as a spiritual break from the continuum of violence the country had experiencing since the 1940s. The national celebration was partly motivated by two narratives: on the one hand, a sporting triumph and its public celebrations were commonly used as cathartic experiences that interrupted the continuous sensation of being strangled in a troubled and violent territory that could not find peace and forgiveness. On the other, Herrera's life story had enough biographical elements that allowed for a massive response and identification with his story and achievements. Just as in the soap operas Colombians watch every single night, the story of Herrera's ascension to the pantheon of international cycling was constructed using emotionally charged tropes, black and white personalities, and a unpredictable resolution: it was the popular melodrama of the underdog that defied everybody's expectations securing his place in the annals of sporting glory.

Although the impossibility of reconstructing a wide and thorough overview of the array of interpretations that the image provoked from a geographical, racial and generational perspective infuses the analysis with an individual interpretative voice, I argue that several elements and conditions assisted in the making of the image's resonance: a) Herrera's bloodied victory coincided with a crucial period of Colombia's inner conflict development; b) it established the Colombian cyclist as a protagonists on the international cycling circuit, giving the Colombian people a sense of pride in the midst of their continuous national tragedy; c) it reaffirmed and exposed the deep-rootedness of Catholic practices attached to cycling culture; d) his life story and physical traits fit perfectly into the in-

stitutionalized projection of Colombian national identity; e) it reinforced blood, and the meanings attached to it, as an integral sign of Colombia's reality, facilitating the metaphorical association with an event embedded with opposite meanings; g) it reaffirmed that "The invisible network of lines its cyclist trace over the nation sometimes feel the only force holding it together, weaving past and future, carrying the cross of their homeland into the mountain, and there, through voluntary acts of suffering paying penance for Colombia's sins" (Rendell 2012, 242).

Notes

1. A generation defined by the rise of the *escarabajos* (Colombian pre-eminent climbers) and the explosion of the famed all-Colombian teams Café de Colombia and Postobon.
2. I understand the metaphor not simply as a rhetorical device or a figure of speech (a trope), but as a conceptual framework that helps understand and experience "one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 5), as well as understand "one domain of experience in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 117).
3. The 1886 constitution recognized Catholicism as the official religion and consecrated the nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Fernandez 2013). A slow secularization process was recognized by the 1991 constitution, institutionalizing the free religious choosing. By 2010, 16,7% of the population interviewed by the author defined themselves as Protestants, almost all of them linked to the Pentecostal movement (Cely 2013, 99)
4. In an interview with *Revista Cromos*, Herrera was asked if he though all the sacrifice that professional cycling entails was worth it. His response: "Cycling is a sport based on sacrifice, is all that effort worth it? As a sport, and as a profession as well, I think it is (Redondo and Pulgarin 1997, 39).
5. 'Cochise' Rodríguez World track amateur record in 1970, or Luis Herrera's stage victory at the 1984 Tour de France are landmarks of Colombia's rise to the international cycling spotlight.

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