
Identidad y humor en *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*

Identity and Humor in *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*

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Resumen: Este artículo analiza cómo la identidad y el humor se presentan como conceptos fluidos en la película salvadoreña *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (2008), dirigida por Roberto Dávila. La película enfatiza la transformación natural de las identidades de los protagonistas, influenciada por el rol del espacio (en este caso, un bosque) y las circunstancias sociales. La película profundiza en la amistad y la confianza que florecen entre el guerrillero y el soldado cuando se encuentran separados de sus grupos respectivos. Esta continua transformación de sus identidades lleva a cambios en sus perspectivas y relaciones del uno al otro. Por otro lado, el humor, como estrategia narrativa, involucra activamente al espectador al subvertir la seriedad asociada a las películas de guerra.

Palabras clave: cine, humor, selva, Centroamérica, identidad, guerra, Roberto Dávila

Abstract: This article analyzes how identity and humor are portrayed as fluid concepts in the Salvadoran film *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (2008), directed by Roberto Dávila. The film emphasizes the transformative nature of the protagonists' identities, shaped by the role of space (in this case, a forest) and social circumstances. It explores the friendship and trust that develop between the *guerrillero* and the soldier when they find themselves separated from their respective groups. This ongoing transformation in their identities leads to shifts in their perspectives and relationships. Conversely, humor, as a narrative strategy, actively engages the viewer by subverting the seriousness typically associated with war films.

Keywords: Cinema, Humor, Forest, Central America, Identity, War, Roberto Dávila

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Introduction

This article examines how the diverse identities of the protagonists and the use of humor as a narrative tool can be understood as a fluid concept in the Salvadoran film *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (2008), directed by Roberto Dávila. For Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*, “identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless” (82). This “ongoing struggle” to find an identity is further emphasized in the film in the context of contemporary Central America. The region faced civil war between the 1960s and the 1990s. This impacted people so profoundly that the identities they were born with suffered a considerable transformation during the post-war period. The conflict brought forth other identities such as *soldados*, *guerrilleros*, refugees, and immigrants. For those who did not leave the region and migrated to other nations, the trauma of war forced them to see life through a different lens. In this article, I will examine the role of humor as a narrative tool and the forest as a narrative space in understanding post-war Central American identity. Jill E. Twark argues in her book *Humor, Satire, and Identity* that “[t]hrough laughter, the marginalized can call the dominant order into question and thereby assert their existence” (6). In *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, this assertion of existence occurs in the forest of Guazapa when a guerrilla fighter and an army man join hands to support each other. This is accomplished through humor as a narrative tool that subverts not only the dominant narrative of Central America, where *soldados* and *guerrilleros* are often portrayed as enemies, but also highlights the repercussions of the war on youth. The film depicts young men fighting as soldiers or joining guerrilla groups, discussing their unhappiness and their worries about an uncertain future for themselves and the country.

Sobreviviendo Guazapa is a contemporary Central American film produced and directed in El Salvador. Avilés Méndez mentions in his thesis that this movie is “el primer largometraje de ficción que realizó el salvadoreño Roberto Dávila” (32). Other Central American film critics have echoed a similar view of the importance of *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, emphasizing that it was made exclusively in El Salvador and starred Central American actors. It is one of the films in Central America in the 21st century that contributes to the shift from other countries making films about Central America to Central Americans telling their own stories. Hispano Durón, in “Rompiendo el Silencio: Diez Años de Nuevo Cine Centroamericano (2001-2010)”, highlights the importance of fictional films made in Central America: “Se observa así, pues, que en los últimos diez años se ha hecho más cine en Centroamérica que el que se hizo en todo el siglo pasado” (248). He further discusses the factors that have led to the increase in Central American films produced within the region, noting that narratives of war and trauma are told in more diverse ways when directed and produced locally, compared to when other nations, such as Mexico or the United States, make films about them. As he states, films like *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* “describen historias con la crisis de los años 80 como fondo y con centroamericanos como protagonistas” (252).

Mauricio Espinoza and Jared List mention that the difference between this century and the previous one in Central American feature film production is that these films “reflect local realities; that is, to create a distinctively Central

American cinema through the generation of ‘images of our identity, our own reflections on film screen’” (4). *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* is a feature film released in Central America during the twenty-first century at a time when cinema from the region experienced a renewed perspective. During this period, state-sponsored film institutes declined across Central America, while the number of individual filmmakers increased, and their narratives often reflected past events. In *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, we see Roberto Dávila telling a story of friendship between a guerrilla fighter and an army man. He sets the story in the past during the war, but offers a fresh perspective on harmony and peace. Espinoza and List state that the lack of consistent film production was due to the underdevelopment of “local film industries” (1). In the 21st century, as noted by Espinoza and List, and referencing Anna Marie de la Fuente, “the fact that in 2017 Costa Rica saw seventeen films locally produced, [...] ‘That’s equivalent to all the films made in Costa Rica in the twentieth century’” (2). Julio Hernández Córdón’s film *Gasolina* (2008), Hernán Jiménez’s *A ojos cerrados* (2010), and Jayro Bustamante’s film *Ixcánul* (2015) are among the contemporary films produced in the region, often in collaboration with European partners.¹ Where *Gasolina* deals with a hopeless situation for Guatemalan youth, *Ixcánul* describes the life of an indigenous girl in Guatemala. It discusses her love for her village, as well as her curiosity to explore the world beyond it, while she struggles to survive in her day-to-day life. Therefore, we observe not only an increase in film production in Central America during the twenty-first century but also new approaches to understanding the region.

The film, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, however, marked a significant phase in Central American cinema, yet it was not an easy journey for the director. Roberto Dávila, the producer, director, scriptwriter, and co-editor of the movie, discusses in an interview with Avilés Méndez the challenges he faced while making the film. It took him three years to complete and “su estreno se efectuó en enero de 2008 en salas de cine salvadoreñas. Una película con presupuesto limitado, un rodaje peculiarmente financiado y ejecutado, que hoy en día se puede ver de manera gratuita en la plataforma digital Youtube” (Avilés Méndez 31). He further emphasizes in the interview that although it was his dream to make a movie in Central America by the people of the country, “en El Salvador no se dan las condiciones para que pueda haber una industria cinematográfica” (32). Nevertheless, films like *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* illustrate the path of developing and producing movies in the region, even if the director’s experience indicates that it was not an easy creation.

The plot of the film centers on the adventures of Pablo, a lost guerrilla fighter, and Julio, a soldier, as they navigate the dense Guazapa forest. Pablo, along with his group, moves through the forest, communicates with other *guerrilleros*, and plants mines along the way for the army. However, soon they encounter the army, and firing begins between them. Many *guerrilleros* are shot, and Pablo loses his brother in the fight. The group begins to escape the area, and during this escape, Pablo loses track of the other members. Julio is

¹ See María Lourdes Cortes’ article on contemporary film production in Central América (2000-2005), in the first part of this dossier.

shown patrolling the forest and trying to locate other army members. It was during this search to locate his group members that Julio met Pablo. The film's story depicts the civil war that took place in El Salvador from 1979 to 1992. The film begins by detailing the significance of Guazapa during the armed conflict, showing how the forest served as a refuge, a planning site, and an execution ground for guerrilla fighters, as well as the numerous attempts by the army to take control of it. Further, the news footage at the beginning of the film creates the impression of a documentary recounting the civil war. The transition from factual news to the film's fictional story happens smoothly. As noted by Hispano Durón in an interview with Roberto Dávila, the director stressed that the real accounts "were incorporated into the narrative as a result of the interviews he conducted with 'former combatants from both sides, looking for anecdotes to be included in the script'" (Durón, "New Central American Cinema" 91), and conveys a sense of authenticity, evoking a true story about the Salvadoran civil war. Avilés Méndez also affirms, "los actores fueron asesorados por exmiembros de la guerrilla y de elementos de la Fuerza Armada en los primeros días de rodaje para interpretar sus papeles y simular las escenas de combate" (34). Thus, the news footage at the beginning and the training of the actors by the people with first-hand experience help create the impression of a real war depicted in the movie.

Additionally, because the movie was shot in natural light in the forest with minimal improvisation, it strengthens the feeling of authenticity. The film aims to blur the line between fact and fiction. It was shot entirely in the forest, with the camera frequently following the protagonists. The camera mostly feels handheld, providing a realistic impression.

Another factor that contributes to the film's aesthetics of authenticity, aside from the natural lighting, is the director's use of minimal sound. Background music is only used to signal death or moments of danger. For example, sad music plays in the background when Pablo's brother Felipe dies. We also hear quick drumbeats when Pablo encounters Julio for the first time, and they begin to fight. Additionally, we hear soft, suspicious music as an indication of danger near the protagonists. Otherwise, the audience can hear the protagonists' footsteps on the leaves or the birds chirping. The hot, humid climate, along with the presence of insects and bugs, is often felt through the characters' sweat, reflecting not only the harsh shooting conditions but also illustrating the reality in which the *guerrilleros* and the army members moved through the forest and fought there.

The camera captures a few wide shots of the entire Guazapa forest, mainly to show its density and the sense of fear it evokes. For example, shots from above and outside the forest are primarily used to show helicopters monitoring what is happening inside. Though from above, only darkness is visible within the forest. Using natural light, handheld shots, and minimal background music creates an atmosphere that allows viewers to observe the protagonists' journey, while also offering a glimpse into the lives of guerrilla fighters and soldiers who lived and fought in Guazapa during the civil war.

On the one hand, I am interested in exploring the various transitions of the protagonists' identities that occur in the forest as a narrative space, which

can be seen as both mysterious and nurturing in the film. The forest is crucial for understanding the characters' transformation from enemies to friends. The importance of space and time is emphasized in the film to grasp the psychological changes of the protagonists and their perspectives on the country's political situation. Zygmunt Bauman notes in *Liquid Modernity*: "Identities seem fixed and solid only when viewed, in a flash, from outside" (83). We notice, therefore, that there is a continuous transformation in their identities, and consequently, in their attitudes and relationships.

On the other hand, humor as a narrative tool challenges the notion of the military's strength, highlights the human bond over war, and subverts the seriousness often associated with war films. The presence of humor alleviates the darkness of a war tale, helping the viewer connect with the characters on a more human level. Linda Hutcheon argues in *Irony's Edge* that "the relationship between irony and humor is a vexed one [...] but not one that can be ignored in dealing with the politics of irony" (25). Humor is a flexible concept in this film, as it neither hinders nor interrupts the narrative, but instead adds depth. Therefore, I associate humor with irony here, as finding humorous scenes in a war film is ironic.

I have divided my article into two sections: the first discusses the role of the forest as a narrative space that helps the viewer understand the identity transformation of the protagonists. The second examines how humor as a narrative strategy not only enhances the story but also enriches the way the Salvadoran civil war is remembered.

The (Re)definition of Identity in Guazapa: Forest as Narrative Space

Sobreviviendo Guazapa reflects on the lives of a *guerrillero* and an army soldier, not when they are with their respective groups, but when they are isolated in the forest. Elements such as friendship and trust are explored in the film only when they stray from their factions. Pablo loses track of his *compañeros* after a military attack. He loses his brother, whom he admired and looked up to as a guerrilla fighter. Julio, too, loses his group while patrolling the forest. They begin introducing themselves and discussing their situations, blaming each other for their current predicament. It is important to note that both were responsible for each other's condition. The film features a gripping narrative, following Pablo and Julio as they are separated from their groups and must reunite to survive in the forest. They either survive by helping one another or die by turning on each other. As we know, the core nature of being human is survival; even in extreme situations, this urge to survive in the forest transforms them from who they are into who they should be. The film illustrates how identity constantly evolves and assumes new forms. From rivals and members of different organizations, they can now be seen as individuals from El Salvador who seek support from one another, and, thus, a friendship begins. Consequently, with the change in space, their identities shift.

The identity that defines them as army and guerrilla fighters in their respective groups differs when they are alone in the forest with each other. They stop

identifying themselves as rivals and develop friendship and solidarity. Pablo and Julio, outside of the forest, belong to different sides of the war, and that is how their identities shaped them, or they shaped themselves according to those identities. As Durón mentions in his thesis:

Dávila looked at the participation of the Catholic Church in the war. Before and during the conflict, a sector of the Catholic Church played an important role in the transformation of the consciousness of peasants and workers. This sector was linked to the Liberation Theology movement, which proposed a new interpretation of the Bible, arguing that the Scriptures specifically called for justice through political change favoring the poor. Some Liberation Theology priests induced Salvadoran peasants to organize in order to defend their rights. ("New Central American Cinema" 92)

In the film, Pablo mentions that a priest introduced him to the guerrilla fighters. We observe that their influences and perceptions varied when they lived in their communities outside the forest. The identities that strengthened their personalities and seemed fixed, were gradually transformed when they entered Guazapa. Identity, thus, is a "fluid" concept. The more we try to stick to it, the more it slips away. Bauman describes this constant change as follows: "identities are more like the spots of crust hardening time and again on the top of volcanic lava which melt and dissolve again before they have time to cool and set" (83). In the forest, as friends, Pablo and Julio try to escape their groups forever and dream of settling in the United States. They share how joining an army or guerrilla was not their choice, the damage the war has done to ordinary people, and the outcome of the battle, where so much is at stake.

Apart from being friends, they are the guardians of a little girl named Ana, who got lost in the forest, and they are determined to bring her home safely. They take turns sleeping at night so the other can watch for dangers lurking in the forest. They share their food with her, offering whatever little remains. On one occasion, we observe Julio helping Ana mend one of her broken shoes. We also notice that Pablo and Julio carry Ana on their backs at night as they search for a safe place to rest. They protect one another and guard against accidents and mishaps. The three form a team based on care, concern, and the hope of returning to their respective homes. This team, comprised of friends, family, or community members, develops not in their daily lives outside the forest, but in a different space: the forest. Bauman explains:

Modernity starts when space and time are separated from living practice and each other and so become ready to be theorized as distinct and mutually independent categories of strategy and action, when they cease to be, as they used to be in long premodern centuries. (8)

In this film, we can say that Pablo and Julio, while living with their *compañeros* outside the forest, were enemies, as "time" was used as a tool against "space conquest and land appropriation" (Bauman 112). In El Salvador, the "subordination [of time] to human inventiveness and technical capacity" (Bauman 112) assigned roles for *guerrilleros* and the army surrounding the "conquest of space", thus creating tensions in human relations based on identities. In other words, a key issue in the civil war was the conflict over the authoritarian govern-

ment's seizure of land from indigenous people and the failure of landowners to grant rights to those working the land. (see Negroponte). This primarily created two groups—the army and the guerrilla—who fought on behalf of the government and the insurgent movements representing marginalized rural populations, respectively. However, tensions and hatred for one another lessen when the protagonists enter Guazapa. The constant change in the protagonists' identities in the forest—from enemies to friends to guardians—leads them back to the essence of being human, which develops only when the tension between time and the “conquest of space” ceases to exist.

The forest, as a living space, differs from the external environment. On the one hand, helicopters bombard from above (outside the forest space), where they can only see the darkness inside. The forest appears mysterious and frightening from the outside. On the other hand, Pablo and Julio, inside the forest, can not only see the helicopters but also explore that dense area and survive. On one occasion, when Julio spots the helicopters, he tries to signal them for help. Since they cannot be seen from above, the helicopters continue shooting and bombing, unable to distinguish between army personnel and *guerrilleros*. We observe that “identities cannot but look fragile, temporary and ‘until further notice’” (Bauman 14) and change according to the relation between time and space. Julio, who is aligned with the army outside the forest, finds himself aligned with the enemy inside it. Thus, perhaps within Guazapa, time and space are interdependent. Can we then say that Guazapa is still in premodern times?

The connection of the forest with premodern times is described in literature from various countries. In “The Role of the Forest in German Literature: From the Medieval Forest to the Grünes Band,” Albrecht Classen argues that the importance of the forest in German literature is evident in both contemporary times and the medieval era. He states, “[t]here are countless other examples of forest scenes in medieval literature, which contain a multitude of ponderous signifiers in which individuals either feel completely lost or recognize that they have entered a utopian or dystopian space” (151). Guazapa is involved in the present-day war in El Salvador, where the army seeks to capture the forest from the *guerrilleros*' hands. Nevertheless, for Pablo and Julio, the forest symbolizes a time distinct from the current war in El Salvador. That is why they have taken on the identities of friends and enemies of authority. Inside Guazapa, Pablo and Julio can dream of a future away from war in another country where they can live a peaceful, everyday life. However, for the soldiers bombing from above the forest, Guazapa appears dense and peculiar. Classen argues, “[t]he forest, significantly, represents the dark space beyond human civilization, either as a refuge or as a threat, or simply as the unknown territory” (161). Outside the forest, Guazapa appears as a threatening and unknowable landscape; within it, however, the space that exists “beyond human civilization” becomes a site of solidarity, friendship, and the possibility of imagining a future beyond war. *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* is one of the many stories focused on nature when recounting the tales of civil war in Central America. Classen's observation that the forest may function either as a refuge or as a threatening, unknown space is reflected in Central American civil war narratives, although these texts emphasize different dimen-

sions of this symbolism. Whereas *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* presents the forest as a space of refuge, friendship, and the possibility of imagining life beyond war, *El hombre de Montserrat* (2006) by Dante Liano depicts it as an infernal landscape in which violence and fear become inescapable. Forests, specifically, have been personified or used as a metaphor in narratives like *El hombre de Montserrat* (2006) and *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa etapa verde* (1982) by Dante Liano and Omar Cabezas, respectively. In *El hombre de Montserrat*, Lieutenant Carlos García is scared of *guerrilleros* in the forest. He compares them to ants: “ants that might not be harmful individually but that are dangerous as a group” (Thakkar 85). Lieutenant García compares the war in the jungle with the city: “Porque no era solo la selva, sino también la Guerra. Lo que pasaba en la ciudad era juguete, comparado con eso. Juguete, porque lo hacían otros. La selva era el puro frente. Enfrentarse con guerrilleros” (99). In Omar Cabezas’s *testimonio*, though “elements of thrill are particularly evident in sections where the narrator describes the dangers and uncertainty inherent in guerrilla life in the forest” (Thakkar 47), there is also a bond that develops between the forest and the *guerrilleros*. For instance, in *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa etapa verde*, the narrator speaks with the forest/mountain:

A veces me salían ganas de decir: mira montaña, si vos sos piedra y vegetal inanimado, vos aquí no pintas nada, vos aquí no discernís; porque a mí me daba la impresión de que ella empezaba a discernir, empezaba a pensar, como que una fuerza interna hacía que ella pensara y que tomara partido y discerniera. (Cabezas 136)

In *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, we also see that the knowledge connection with the forest is more evident in Pablo, and that Julio trusts Pablo when they need to navigate it. For example, at the beginning of the film, when Pablo decides to leave the cave where he has been hiding, Julio advises him to wait until morning. The next day, Julio follows Pablo, saying that Pablo knows the forest better. This highlights an important relationship between the forest and the guerrilla fighters.

The forest has occupied a central place in Latin American literature and film, functioning as a narrative space through which writers and filmmakers explore identity, survival, violence, spirituality, and the relationship between humans and nature. Across different historical periods and genres, forests have been represented not merely as physical landscapes but as spaces that shape human experience. For example, metaphorical language is present in *Los pasos perdidos* (1953, 1985) by Alejo Carpentier, where the main character describes his journey through the Latin American forests. He states: “Un día, los hombres descubrirán un alfabeto en los ojos de las calcedonias, en los pardos terciopelos de la falena, y entonces se sabrá con asombro que cada caracol manchado era, desde siempre, un poema” (270). Another example of forest portrayal in the Americas is found in works like *Naufragio* (1542) by Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, where he discusses the difficulty of traveling through American forests. He mentions: “algunas veces entramos por ancones y bahías que entraban por la tierra adentro; todas las hallamos bajas y peligrosas” (31-32). As we observe, forests are often linked to themes of self-discovery in the case of *Los pasos perdidos*, mystery and danger in case of *Naufragio*. However, stories, especially from the Isthmus, add another layer to these themes—highlighting the story of the Civil War and

the conflict between guerrilla fighters and the army. The link between the forest and the civil war experience is also evident in Tatiana Huezo's *El lugar más pequeño* (2011), which explores the Salvadoran Civil War through the memories of the residents of Cinquera, a community devastated by conflict. In the film, the landscape is deeply tied to memories of violence, displacement, survival, and reconstruction. While *El lugar más pequeño* foregrounds the relationship between landscape and the memory of war, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* portrays the forest more explicitly as a refuge and a space for human connection during the conflict. For instance, we see the forest as a mysterious and dangerous place for the army, yet also as a refuge for *guerrilleros*. We cannot discuss refuge, self-discovery, and the forest's mystery without mentioning the war. Thus, nature (the forest and mountains) connects with Central Americans (*guerrilleros* and soldiers) not only as a space for exploring identity or discovering oneself, but also as an important part of the war fought during the twentieth century in Central America.

The Role of Humor as Narrative Strategy

The tragic story of war and death, narrated through humor, helps viewers grasp the idea of two opposing parties coming together. Pablo and Julio belong to the army and the guerrilla, the major groups in Central America that fight against each other. It is through humor that the director effectively demonstrates the love and friendship that develop in a crisis situation. Humor in this film can be described as comic relief, particularly when the protagonists face danger and emerge unscathed. As a fluid narrative tool, humor questions the concept of identity, revealing its inconsistent and adaptable nature. For instance, the film's humor challenges our perception of army personnel as powerful and suggests that a friendly relationship can exist between adversaries. It is worth reflecting on the reasons for using strategies like humor to advance the narrative in a war film. Jill E. Twark, in *Humor, Satire, and Identity*, discusses some reasons behind incorporating humor in describing trauma, war, and demanding situations in people's lives (in her case, East German people). She states: "Despite, and perhaps because of, their often harsh, critical contents, these texts expose truths about East(ern) German experiences that media and official historical records may miss or intentionally ignore" (2). Twark's statements prompt me to ask: Did the director intentionally implement humor as one of the narrative strategies to tell the tale of friendship between a guerrilla fighter and the army that might have been missed in "official historical records" or "intentionally ignored"? While other Central American civil war narratives foreground either military or guerrilla experiences, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* distinguishes itself by centering the relationship between a soldier and a guerrilla fighter, thereby humanizing both sides of the conflict. Although *El hombre de Montserrat* also employs humor and irony to critique the military perspective, its narrative remains focused on the experience of an army officer rather than on the possibility of friendship across opposing sides. The film was made after the peace treaty in El Salvador was

signed,² and the friendship between the protagonists may be read as reflecting the broader aspiration for reconciliation following the civil war. Although Twark's discussion focuses on postwar German literature, her observation about the liberating potential of humor provides a useful framework for understanding Dávila's representation of the Salvadoran Civil War. Twark argues that...“through [...] humorous writing, [...] they could suddenly lampoon and criticize freely, without fear of governmental censorship” (3). She notes that various German authors believe in “the idea of humor as an act of liberation” (3). Applied to Dávila's film, this idea of humor as a form of liberation helps illuminate how he uses comedy to move beyond the hostility between the Salvadoran army and the *guerrilleros*. Rather than reinforcing the political and ideological divisions that separated the two groups, the director emphasizes the absurdities and contradictions of war, in which people from the same country fight against one another while simultaneously experiencing and expressing their own unhappiness. In other words, humor underscores the importance of humanity and peace over political and ideological struggles. Many examples in the movie illustrate the use of humor. The character of Julio, a carefree and fun-loving young man, brings laughter to audiences through most of his actions. In contrast, Pablo is a serious and meticulous individual who plans his next move thoughtfully and responsibly. In one instance, we see Pablo and Julio resting and eating while Julio playfully teases Pablo into revealing his real name. Bees start attacking them after Julio throws a can at the beehive. The scene's intensity heightens as they run away from the bees. Suddenly, Julio falls from a cliff but manages to survive by gripping the edge. Pablo quickly saves him by pulling him back from the steep drop. He yells at Julio for being careless and appears visibly nervous. After being rescued, Julio seems scared and anxious. He takes Pablo's criticisms like a young boy and then leaves, saying that he never wants his help. The facial expressions of both protagonists, although genuine given the tense situation, provide comic relief for the audience as viewers experience the scene's intensity with the actors.

In another instance, almost at the beginning of the movie, Pablo saves Julio, in rivalry rather than friendship. This occurs as they escape the bombardment and gunfire from the helicopters, hiding in a cave during the night. The next day, they decide to go their separate ways. However, after parting from Julio, Pablo realizes he has planted mines on Julio's route. Initially, Julio thinks that Pablo is merely trying to scare him, so he does not believe him; but when Pablo confirms that he has indeed planted them, Julio becomes scared and asks for Pablo's advice. Both are terrified, not knowing where the mines are located. Julio, in particular, feels frightened as he walks backward, repeatedly asking Pablo for help and suggestions. The expression on Julio's face resembles that of a helpless and frightened boy. The situation intensifies in both scenarios, keeping the audience nervous and attentive. Nevertheless, the scene's intensity begins to ease once Julio is saved. Julio, a soldier perceived as brave, appears scared, like a naïve young boy. He cries and seeks protection from Pablo whenever he is in trouble.

²“In El Salvador, the peace agreement was signed in 1992 [...] However, many critics such as Alexandra Ortiz Wallner and Arturo Arias (in *El arte de ficcionar* and *Taking Their Word*, respectively) note that effectively the peace process in the region began in the late eighties, and accelerated after the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Government in the 1990” (Thakkar 1).

Quoting Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Hutcheon argues that "ironic modes such as parody, travesty, and caricature are always, despite their seemingly innocent humor, actually 'directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect'" (51). It is ironic to see fear on the face of a soldier. On the one hand, humor challenges the notion of fearless soldiers and their fierce personalities; on the other, it lightens the mood of the situation. The intense environment demonstrates that the struggle they are experiencing in the forest is alleviated; thus, humor helps create a balanced narrative and keeps the audience engaged.

Humor in this war film not only provides temporary comic relief for viewers but also offers an alternative way to address the region's past and traumatic memories. As Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and His World*, "[the] boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (4). Humor not only challenges the portrayal of the army as invincible but also questions how the traumatic past is approached. The civil war history of Central America, however complex, may be addressed in multiple ways. Discussing past stories today is important to keep alive the suffering experienced by those involved. Still, we do not rely solely on traditional narration methods to tell these stories. Humor, through the movie, subverts the conventional ideas of war story narration and shows how it can be an effective way to share such accounts. It becomes not only a tool for healing trauma but also adds depth to the film.

By the end of the movie, the characters develop a strong bond. However, their love and care for each other mainly become clear during their fights. In the examples mentioned above and on other occasions, they start fighting and cursing at each other once the danger has passed. These conflicts add humor to this serious war film. The audience relaxes after the threat ends and laughs when Pablo and Julio engage in silly arguments. The scene in which they find Ana lost in the forest also adds to the humor. They discover Ana crying because she is lost, and when they ask her how she got lost, she explains that her chicken ran away while she was trying to fetch it. Moments earlier, we saw Pablo and Julio find a chicken in the forest and get excited to prepare it for a meal, as food was scarce for them. The guilt they share when they realize the chicken belongs to Ana creates a funny moment for the audience. Humor, in this example, links the soldier and the *guerrillero*, who make the same mistake. This event shows they are no longer opponents but belong to the same team. Once again, humor demonstrates that a bond of unity can exist between a soldier and a guerrilla fighter.

In *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, humor not only showcases the friendship among three people from different parts of society but also entertains viewers, keeps them engaged, and helps them understand the protagonists' new identities, which differ from the ones they had when they entered the forest. Hutcheon argues:

It is irony's edge that appears to be what gives certain forms of humor [...] its status as a "survival skill, a tool for acknowledging complexity, a means of exposing or subverting oppressive hegemonic ideologies, and an art for affirming life in the face of objective troubles (Fischer 1986: 224)". (25)

Humor, as an ironic tool, has shown the core of being human: surviving and “affirming life” in any situation. Therefore, when Pablo and Julio find themselves in a situation in which space and time are linked, we see the true nature of humans. It is not to “pass through,” “cross,” “cover,” or “conquer” space, but to help, protect, and live life with others in harmony.

Conclusion

We observe that both Pablo and Julio ultimately become victims of the army when they are captured and targeted. In the end, Pablo is killed during the attack, while Julio rescues Ana and returns her safely home. The film explores how the perspectives of two combatants evolve as they struggle to survive in the dense forests of Guazapa. The forest not only becomes a space where they form an unlikely friendship but also where they reconnect with their shared humanity beyond the ideological divisions of war. Produced and released after the signing of the Salvadoran Peace Accords, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* participates in the postwar re-examination of the civil conflict by foregrounding reconciliation, shared suffering, and the human cost of violence. Although ideological divisions remain visible throughout the narrative, the film ultimately emphasizes the sacrifices and suffering experienced by Salvadorans on both sides of the conflict, revealing that neither Pablo nor Julio finds fulfillment within the groups to which they belong and that both imagine a future beyond war. The film encourages its audience to reflect on the identities of *guerrilleros* and military personnel, as well as on how these identities can be perceived in the post-war era. Though these identities are important in the civil war, they are also carriers of trauma and agony. Twark argues: “By reproducing their identity in relation to the dominant culture and laughing at it, the marginalized act out their belonging to this group” (6). Thus, humor helps us to realize the deeper meaning of identity in relation to the dominant culture’s imposition of separation and animosity dividing the region. Humor, as a narrative tool, asks the audience not to dismiss the idea that the film proposes—to envision a new bond and a fresh connection between the two dominant groups of the country during the war: the guerrilla fighters and the army soldiers.

Sobreviviendo Guazapa emphasizes the true objective of the young men of El Salvador: to live a peaceful life, free from war. As Durón states:

The image of two fighters of opposing sides, leaving the war, and uniting to rescue a little girl, could be seen as a metaphor of the peace accords. In this metaphor, the little girl would symbolize the new Salvadoran generations living in peace. Meanwhile, the film’s happy ending, when Julio (representing the security forces) brings Ana to her house, would symbolize the culmination of the peace accords. (“New Central American Cinema” 93)

It does not matter whether they are guerrilla fighters or soldiers; both groups dislike the war. The protagonists quickly shake off the political and social identities imposed on them by the outside world as soon as they enter the forest. As Classen asserts in his article, “[t]he forest is a space where human conditions and laws no longer apply; hence both wild animals and robbers have fair play

and can do whatever they please” (149). Through changeable notions of identity in the forest as a narrative space, and humor as a fluid narrative tool, viewers experience the importance of life during wartime. Unlike many other war movies that are adventurous but focus on shooting, killing, death, and hopeless situations, this film is different because it unites two enemies fighting against each other. They need one another to find their way out of the forest, just as they need each other to lead their lives in their country. Hence, they begin to see each other as human beings rather than as guerrilla fighters or soldiers. Beyond the ironic situations, the film, with the help of humor, highlights the desire for hope and peace among the people of El Salvador. The movie, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, tells a sad story but emphasizes the value of life and the importance of friendship.

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