

Narco Series

A New Narco-Ethics?

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3. *The Lord of the Heavens*. 4. *The Queen of the South*.

1. *Camelia the Texan*. 2. *The Team*.

Many Latin Americans living in the United States today can say they have not lost their cultural roots in part thanks to the television produced in Miami. Far from their homelands, but rebuilding them

through fiction, Mexican scriptwriters, directors, actors, and producers recover the life, world view, and social predicaments of their places of origin to transmit them to their compatriots living in the same uprooted circumstances. *Telenovelas*, or soap operas, have historically played a fundamental role in this sense: they unify the experiences of transnational communities, develop a feeling of identity for Latin American migrants in the United States, and keep memory alive. *El señor de los*

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Photos courtesy of series production companies.



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The Team.

cielos (The Lord of the Heavens), for example, is already in its third season; in three years it became the most successful *telenovela* ever produced by the U.S. television network Telemundo, together with the Mexican production company Argos, boasting an audience of over three million viewers.¹ This is a sub-genre of the traditional *novela*, which has been dubbed “narco series,” revolving around the world of drug trafficking, bringing the violence of the cartels and the adventures of the big drug kingpins to the small screen.

It may be so successful because *The Lord of the Heavens* is inspired by the life and the myths about drug trafficker Amado Carrillo Fuentes (the show’s character Aurelio Casillas) and tells the story of a flesh-and-blood man that all the Latinos in the United States have heard of. So successful, also, because it has taken on board all the elements of this cultural creation that has, in turn, been dubbed the “narco aesthetic,” the image of the culture surrounding drug trafficking, spawning works like the aforementioned *novelas*, literature, film, and music. A narrative sub-genre derived from this social problem that, from the Miami television industry, has captivated Mexican viewers, depicting villains who seem to be heroes in a constant struggle against dark political forces.

The narco-aesthetic has emphasized ostentation, showing off excessive luxury in high-quality clothing, mansions, haciendas, and surgically-created beautiful women. Money gotten through murdering rivals and highly profitable drug trafficking at the same time that it puts anyone in the business’s life in danger. Existing on the limits, always in danger, and therefore valiantly. Lives worth living in order to get wealth, fame, power. An attractive image for multiple audiences: adults, young people, and even children who project their yearnings, dreams,

and fantasies of splendor in that vision of others who have escaped from misery, poverty, and helplessness, to become millionaires, respected by all. A way of thinking that has become an ethics, more than an aesthetic, as Colombian critic Omar Rincón says, “Anything goes to stop being poor,” the ethics of financial gain at the cost of anyone who gets in your way.²

Some elements of the narco-aesthetic have been appropriated by the narco series to make a few pioneering *novelas* into million-dollar investments with heretofore unimagined ratings, like *La reina del Sur* (The Queen of the South), *Camelia la texana* (Camelia the Texan), *Señora acero* (Lady Steel), and the three seasons of *The Lord of the Heavens* by Telemundo and Argos; *Los dueños del paraíso* (Owners of Paradise), a co-production of Telemundo and Chile’s National Television station; Univisión’s *Escobar, el patrón del mal* (Pablo Escobar: The Drug Lord) and *La viuda negra* (The Black Widow); AXN’s *El mariachi* (The Mariachi); and TNT’s *Señorita pólvora* (Miss Gunpowder), creations of U.S. television networks who have decided to use Mexican screenwriters and actors to invest capital in this format in view of these stories’ high earnings, though they have little love and lots of blood.

Telenovelas with elements of the narco-aesthetic, like ostentation and excess: excessive violence, excessive wealth,³ and a new narco-ethics that has inverted the melodramatic format of the classic soap opera. Unconditional love is replaced

by ambition. The leads are no longer a couple that viewers hope to see at the altar in the last episode. Love has given way to torture, aggression, and murders. The hero is no longer the brave policeman who fights the villain's evildoings; he is now the millionaire drug kingpin fighting for his life, facing down corrupt cops, representatives of a tainted political system.

Aurelio Casillas, the Lord of the Heavens; Teresa, the Queen of the South; Anastasia Cardona, the Owner of Paradise: these are the people who in a traditional melodrama we would identify as the villains. They're bloodthirsty, pitiless leaders of illegal businesses. But, it's they we hope to see on television. It's with them that we identify since, like us, they are part of the people: they love, fear, and, just like we would like to, triumph. They are hero-protagonists, who struggle against their adverse destiny and come out the victors. Characters who face off with the often corrupt morally-bankrupt police and governments who come out at the other end successfully. This is the mark the U.S. television networks have put on their series created for Hispanic audiences. With that, perhaps without thinking about it, they have added a new component to that list of the narco-aesthetic converted into narco-ethics: the inversion of the melodrama in which drug kingpins turn out to be the heroes.

These are popular, epic tales that, far from offering a negative view of the illicit aspects of drug trafficking, have made violence, blood, and death an answer to social injustices, the lack of opportunities, and political corruption. A heroic perspective about drug traffickers: traffickers who have a clear moral code, whose main concern is the family, and who triumph over police, the real villains. Villains, since their main moti-

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vation is always money, to the detriment of the welfare of the country they say they serve.

On the first season of *The Lord of the Heavens*, Marco Mejía is the son of DEA agent Enrique Camarena, tortured and murdered in Mexico. He is the one who should be the hero, but he is portrayed as an aggressive, unfaithful, vengeful character. And, of course, in accordance with the classical parameters of melodrama, he dies at the end of the season, while hero Aurelio Casillas goes on to become the sole kingpin, flaunting his unlimited power and riches.

Cops as the evil characters are taken to the extreme in all the narco series: corrupt, ambitious, pitiless. Parts of the government and the militia are also presented from the dark side, associated with the drug cartels as their political and financial interests dictate. They change trafficking bosses according to the possibilities offered by them. By contrast, the drug traffickers have a clear moral code: they protect the people and their families above all else, and they do not hide their illegal activities. Thus, while government institutions trick the public creating an image of security, stability, and protection, the great drug lords take care of their people and promote loyalty and solidarity. "It's better to be a trafficker with balls than a vulgar agent whose word means nothing, who has no decency, no moral code," says the Lord of the Heavens.

This inversion of the traditional melodramatic code is taken to its maximum expression in the narco series *The Queen of the South*. Teresa, the world's most wanted drug trafficker, saves Mexico from corruption in the final episode. In a pact with the DEA, she decides to testify against Epifanio Vargas, the trafficker of all traffickers, a senator, and the next president of Mexico. With her testimony, it is she who thwarts this big trafficker's ambitions that would sink Mexico into a narco-state. Teresa literally saves her country, becoming a full-fledged heroine.



The Lord of the Heavens.



The Queen of the South.



Lady Steel.



Camelia the Texan.

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The Queen of the South.



The Lord of the Heavens.



Drug traffickers as heroes, ostentatious, surrounded by every imaginable luxury, and at the same time brave and sensitive to the needs of their people, have turned this narco-aesthetic into a narco-ethics, propagating this model not only in literature, film, and songs, but in *telenovelas*, probably the format with the biggest impact on the public. This image created by Mexicans in the United States has threatened the government, which has responded by creating series to show their side of the story.

One such effort was the series *El equipo* (The Team), broadcast by Televisa, which tried to portray the fight against crime as an epic story. Its lead characters, brave police willing to give their lives for justice, hunt big drug kingpins and always come out on top. Following the classic rules of a police procedural, it tried to offer the citizenry security and confidence in the police. It also tried to clean up the public image of the Mexican federal police forces, constantly accused of being corrupt. The heroes were police; the villains, marginal types: a classic melodrama.

The Team was counterposed to *The Lord of the Heavens*, two similar television programs but with different moral values, different poles of good and evil. TV viewers' critical spirit is also different. Mexican television tries to adjust the model of righteousness and honor that constantly comes under question in reality. To the contrary, the narco series produced in Miami impugn this model. The drug traffickers come from the people, without money, without jobs; but, they get to the top on their own merits —granted, in an illegal activity, but through their own efforts. They are recognizable characters, with virtues and defects: ostentatious but sincere, sensitive to their people and their families; in the end, with good hearts. In contrast, public servants lie, are corrupted because of their unbridled ambitions, and represent a flawed system.

As Raquel Velasco writes about the literature portraying drug trafficking, narco series also make visible the denunciation of the lack of opportunities, the corruption of governments and institutional parties, and violence as the only alternative for escaping from anonymity and poverty: "This narrative offers an explanation of the times we are living in, founded on the consequences of a corrupt government and the ancestral submission of a people incapable of electing better representatives."⁴ As a mirror we hold up to ourselves, the narco series, produced by Mexicans living in the United States, say more about ourselves than the vertigo of the violence and the adrenaline of bullets flying. A narco-ethics that carries with it a questioning of the society in which we live, a debate that needs to be opened. ■■■

NOTES

¹ "El señor de los cielos rompe récord de audiencia en E.U.," *Diario Basta*, April 24, 2015, <http://www.diariobasta.com/basta/nota.php?id=14335>.

² These elements, today recognized as part of the narco-aesthetic, have been summarized mainly by Colombian theoreticians like Omar Rincón, Héctor Abad Faciolince, and Alberto Fonseca. It should also be mentioned that the narco-aesthetic as a sub-genre has its precedents in Colombian literature in the novels *La virgen de los sicarios* (The Virgin of the Hitmen) by Fernando Vallejo, *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (Without Tits, There's No Paradise) by Gustavo Bolívar, and *El cártel de los sapos* (The Frog Cartel). The last two have also been made into narco series.

³ Colombian critic Héctor Abad Faciolince points out that ostentation is the central component in what has been called the narco-aesthetic; therefore, it is this element that makes us, as viewers, want that life. "The gangsters realize the secret dream of almost every merchant: being able to show off. The fact that they have what others secretly want is the key to their success." Héctor Abad Faciolince, "Estética y narcotráfico," *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* vol. 42, no. 3, 2008, p. 514.

⁴ Raquel Velasco, "La narrativa del narcotráfico y la novela del sicariato en México," in Norma Cuevas and Raquel Velasco, eds., *El norte y el sur de México en la diversidad de su literatura* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos Editor, 2011), p. 270.