

Political Visuality of Latin America in Narcos: a television style analysis

Visualidad política de América Latina en Narcos: un análisis a través del estilo televisivo

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Abstract

From the theoretical approach of the visual studies articulated with television style analysis, I intend to analyze visualities of Latin America and historical events on the contemporary drug problem exhibited in the first season of Narcos (Netflix, 2015). Based on the primary meaning established by the producers, it is possible to understand the complex relationships between crime, economy, formal politics and corruption.

Keywords

Visuality; Narcos; Latin America; Television Style.

Resumen

Desde la fundamentación teórica ofrecida por los estudios visuales articulados al análisis del estilo televisivo, propongo analizar visualidades de América Latina y de eventos históricos que tratan la problemática contemporánea de las drogas exhibidas en la primera temporada de *Narcos* (Netflix, 2015). A partir de la identificación del sentido tutor, definido por los realizadores de la serie, es posible captar las complejas relaciones establecidas entre crimen, economía, política formal y corrupción.

Palabras clave

Visualidad; Narcos; América Latina; estilo televisivo.

1. Introduction

A little over a decade ago audiovisual productions depicting the global issue of drug trafficking began making an appearance. The issues portrayed in these productions dealt with the politics of international relations and how the trade leads to corruption, violence, crime and has an overall effect on local society. In confirmation of this trend, in August of 2015 the digital platform Netflix launched the first season of the series *Narcos*, which primarily deals with the rise, peak and dismantling of the Medellín drug cartel in Colombia.

Most of the series was filmed in Colombia in 2014. Having identified the 'guiding principal' the study proceeded to audio-visually analyze the subject matter, guided by the principals of visuality, and executed as per the structure of studies of television style. The study briefly and critically outlines the first season and how it visually represents Latin America and the events surrounding the contemporary drug problem. It also captures the complex relationships between crime, economy, politics and corruption.

2. *Narcos*

Narcos is a Netflix production made in alliance with Gaumont International Television, the American branch of the French production company GaumontTelevision. The creative team consists of Chris Brancato, Carlo Bernard and Doug Miro. The executive producers are Eric Newman, Jose Padilha and Chris Brancato. Although it is an original production, it is important to note that series like this bear a certain structural similarity to television narratives (Thompson, 2003). According to Françoise Jost's study (2011) television is an important reference for productions on digital media. Analyzing examples of these series the author highlights the fact that these productions are based on the serial narrative of television productions, extracting the best elements they have to offer.

There were four directors in the first season: the Brazilians Jose Padilha (episodes 1 and 2) and Fernando Coimbra (episodes 7 and 8); the Mexican Guillermo Navarro (3 and 4) and the Colombian Andres Baiz (5, 6, 9 and 10). The series is narrated in the first person by the North American DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) agent Steve Murphy, who moved to Colombia to fight the growing cocaine trade in the US. "We wanted to create a series that would interest two audiences, the North American and Latin viewers. The way we found was through the story of the DEA agent" explains Padilha¹. In this case the narrator was a strategic choice to reach a greater market (over 50% of the US) of Netflix users, given that a first person narrative is an approach that brings the viewer closer to the narrative, seen through the eyes of a character involved in the conflict.

The story starts in 1973 when cocaine production was located in Chile, and interrupted by Pinochet's zero tolerance of drug traffickers. Escobar, a smuggler at the time, seeing the wide acceptance of the drug in the US, begins exporting it in small amounts and, due to the high demand and high profitability, begins to export the drug by the ton, arriving at a lucrative peak of 60 million dollars a day. This was how the Medellín Drug Cartel was born, and its violent and terrifying *Modus Operandi* became known. Escobar was also deeply involved in politics, eventually becoming a congressman with intentions of running for president of Colombia. Given all that happened prior to being elected a congressman, he is accused by the Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, and, from that moment on, Escobar declares war on the State, starting a period in Colombian history rife with violence, bomb attacks, murder and kidnapping that led to the coining of the term, narco-terrorism.

The drug Capo was imprisoned for a time, then violated his agreement to surrender to the authorities made with the President of Colombia, ran and went into hiding. He remained isolated until his capture by the Search Bloc that included the dubious collaboration of the Cali drug

cartel, and members of the paramilitary group Los Pepes (persecuted by Pablo Escobar) who were particularly interested in killing him for multiple reasons. He was executed on the second of December, 1993.

3. A Visuality Analysis

The idea behind visual studies, especially that developed by William J. Thomas Mitchell (2009), is a displacement of the story and art to focus on culture and visuality, the latter focusing on historic and cultural depictions different to any other visual experience. At the center of the concept Mitchell proposes that: 1) to assimilate what he has dubbed a "pictorial turn", not in the sense of it being a better option than the "linguistic turn", rather as a gesture of putting an image to a theory, in other words, instead of ready-made discourse to describe a picture, start with the visual representation and how the image leads to cultural and historical aspects; 2) adopt the concept of visuality; 3) analyze the picture (a picture refers to an image, with its corresponding support and medium); 4) study the interaction between visual and verbal representation through a composite of the two.

For Pablo Servio (2014) culture permeates our visual experience in different ways. According to the author our brain has limited capacity to process information captured through the eyes, meaning that perception becomes selective and in this context, the cultural dimension we perceive is such that, to a large extent, we focus on specific things, events or people. According to him, while neuroscience deals with the physiological aspects of vision and forms much of the empirical basis of the visual experience, visuality deals with our experience based on the matrix of inter-subjectivity and the creation of specific ways of seeing based on history and culture. According to Scholhammer (2002) Mitchell was the driving force behind the process with his proposal of a pictorial turn; his

proposal of the idea of how we perceive an image is as a paradigm within human science

today, in the same manner as language took on new meaning in the linguistic turn of the sixties, that is to say, not only as a central topic of a research paper, but also a cultural characteristic (31-32).

As far as the object is concerned, Mitchell's proposal clarifies a central point. Visual studies is not a field dedicated to the study of images, rather the visual experience of what we see on a day-to-day basis. In summary, visuality becomes a subject worth special attention, as it covers all the visual practices of 'seeing', of how we see what we see, under the influence of socio-cultural issues that are indelibly printed on the experience.

According to Brea (2005: 8-9) in the field of visual studies, visuality is a topic of research comprised of a set of factors processed between operators (textual, mental, imaginary, technical, bureaucratic and institutional) and the interests of each representation (of race, gender, class, cultural difference, beliefs and affinities etc.). That is why the act of seeing and doing are results of a cultural construction that is both complex and hybrid.

The richness of this perspective is in the need to assume a critical position when faced with the myth of visual hegemony and the naturalization of the act of seeing to understand visual culture and the rules of visuality, in the words of Mitchell "in a broad sense the cultural determination of a visual experience" (Servio, 2014: 199). This is what Brea (2005) calls the political epistemology of visuality, in his view, seeing, and the manner in which a person acts as a result of what they see, articulates with power relations, domination, privilege and control.

For Mitchell, all media is mixed, cinema, comics, television are the most evident given the way they materialize the heterogeneity of the composition of image and text to reflect on the modality in which semiotic and perceptual elements combine. Observing the point at which they meet or join is not just a matter of formality, that place also begs the question "what the specific forms of heterogeneity mi-

ght be. Both formal and functional questions require historical questions" (Mitchell, 2009: 85).

Analytically Mitchell adopts a form that ensures the best place to investigate a representation is the representation itself, the materiality that gives structure to the combination of image and text, and not a theory or discourse that anticipates and models said representation. This prompts a close look at the articulation of visual and textual codes that figure in the visual experience and problematization.

The openness resulting from studies into visual culture is significant considering just how broad the range of subjects the field covers. For Barnard (2001: 1-2), they go from "the fine arts or canonic arts to design, cinema, photography, advertising, video, television or the Internet". Mitchell assures that the television medium, like cinema and theatrical performance and, I would add, the narrative produced for online platforms, present:

Actual conjunctions of words and images (...). In such forms we encounter an image/text structure (or resistance to conventions) governing the relation of visual and verbal experience (Mitchell, 2009: 85).

Mitchell proposes a post-linguistic understanding of image, posits that the relation established between the researcher and the image is essential. Before broaching the question of meaning, the researcher must understand, even if only in a figurative sense, that images must be seen as animate beings that want or intend to say something. To move away from questions of meaning and power does not mean to abandon procedure inherent to semiotics, hermeneutics or rhetoric.

4. Methodology

To analyze television production, based on the notion of visuality, I propose joining said analysis

with a formal analysis of television style (Butler, 2010) to broach audiovisual productions and their contextual entanglements. On this analytical path one must build an interpretation of television narrative in the understanding that a dense cultural terrain supports and nurtures the true complexity of visual representation, its implications and development.

According to Jeremy Butler style is any technical pattern of image/sound that plays a part within the text "style is their texture, their surface, the web that holds together their signifiers and through which their signified are communicated" (Butler, 2010:15)². The inspiration comes from David Bordwell, erudite of the history of style in cinema, and for whom style is "the tangible texture of the film, the perceptual surface we encounter as we watch and listen, and that surface is our point of departure in moving to plot, theme, feeling" (2008:32).

In his endeavor Butler presents four analytical dimensions: 1) the descriptive that opens the text for analysis; 2) analytics, based on Noel Carroll's studies on "functional theory of style in the individual film"; 3) valuation and 4) history. In this analysis focus is on the association between description and function³ to find the purpose introduced through technical elements – costume, staging, photography, framing, sound track, blocking of actors in scene.

Description is the basic step; in order to discuss style one must be able to describe it. It requires the analyst fully understand what is style and how it works on television. Semiotics offer the widest range of tools to make a detailed description. It's necessary therefore to find the stylistic essence in the details of the transmission of sound and image on television. We must as of necessity "reverse engineer" the texts for full understanding of its style. In this fashion the attention to detail in the work of the writers, directors, director of photography, editors and other professionals that build a television text must also be applied in its deconstruction. The description of a program is not intended as a means to replicate it, but to promote analysis.

The second step, based on Noel Carroll's functional theory of style in film, is intended as a means to detect the purpose of style and its function in the text. The work of the scholar in question consists in the deconstruction of the function of style. By deconstructing it, the analyst examines how it works within the textual system – looking for patterns in stylistic elements, and, at a more elevated level, the relationships between these patterns.

In accordance with the functional approach to film form, the form (or style) of an individual film is the collection of choices whose intention is to materialize the purpose of the film. This approach to the film form is different to the descriptive approach. The descriptive maintains that form is the sum total of all the relations between the elements of a film. The functional states that the film form barely includes the elements and relations intended to serve as a medium for the purpose of the film (2003:141).

Butler indicates several of the functions of television style. Some of these styles are inherited from film, others he developed for the medium: denote, express, symbolize, decorate, persuade, call or question, differentiate and the meaning of "live". Television style can fulfill several of these functions at the same time. Given all the above, Butler maintains that to question, for the purpose of waking the viewer and capturing their attention, is fundamental in any circumstance.

5. Analysis

One of the big challenges of working with television content is in the significant amount of material that one product can yield (Rocha & Pucci, 2016: 10). In order to choose what to analyze the guiding principle, or what in the opinion of the production team and cast defines the series and its subject matter, must be identified. To capture that principle means looking at *Narcos* without trying to find a corresponding aspect between what was intended and what

was effectively produced, but it does mean understanding how some choices on what to show interfere with the visual experience on offer.

For Wagner Moura *Narcos* "(...) is not a series about Pablo. It's a series about the origin of modern drug trafficking and you just can't talk about that without mentioning Colombia, without talking about the Medellín Cartel"⁴. Jose Padhil already defines it as a "series on the history of drug trafficking, of cocaine specifically. It starts in Chile, moves through Pablo Escobar and heads on to Cali (Colombia). If we did more seasons it would move all the way on up to Mexico"⁵. Several other statements in that vein make it possible to track the guiding principle as one that considers the history of cocaine smuggling a global phenomenon, that crosses national borders and revolves around international policies between international governments, but nonetheless it still has a relationship with local institutions and authorities, mafias and the particular realities in each region.

Capturing the underlying subject matter or purpose contributed to mapping the historical facts covered in the series, and to choose which should be analyzed. In that manner, the corpus consists of the visual representation of two historical facts.

The first fact relates to the beginnings of the cocaine trade in Colombia as perceived by the US, and how this became a domestic problem for the country. To analyze this particular historical fact two sequences from the first episode *Descenso* were chosen:

1) The sequence covering Pablo's first arrest in 1976, in the city of Medellín which culminates in the photograph of the head of the cartel when taken in for a drug trafficking charge. The choice of this particular sequence is justified taking into consideration the crucial importance the photo will have in the course of the series' narrative.

2) The sequence covering the first actions taken by the US Government when faced by the advance of cocaine abuse in their coun-

try, launching a new phase in the war against drugs. Choosing this sequence is justified in its importance to the manner in which the Colombian government will drive its own policy on drugs, based on its relationship with the US Government.

The second historical fact, with scenes and sequences from the chapter *The Men of Always*, is the murder of the Colombian Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, the person responsible for publicly revealing Pablo Escobar's mug shot to the public after his arrest in Medellín. This choice is justified given the Minister's relevance in the narrative, for being the one person who shed light on Escobar's persona as a drug trafficker, who revealed the acts of the US Government and exposed their political agenda in the war on drugs, and who ultimately became one of the first victims of assassination at the order of Pablo Escobar.

6. The launch of the business

Escobar in the first episode *Descenso* comes across as an intimidating and overbearing man. When trying to smuggle in a shipment of contraband to Colombia, and subsequently stopped by a police squad, he simply states that he controls the entire department in Antioquia and that he is the future president of the Republic. Escobar gives the police officers two choices: either accept his proposal or assume the consequences, phrased as *Silver or lead*. The officers give in to the pressure and Pablo continues on with his shipment. In other words, in their first appearance, the Colombian police are portrayed as a fragile and corruptible institution.

Descenso also describes the start of the business as an informal production process that will change Medellín for ever. The series depicts the details behind cocaine production in laboratories, illegal transport of coca paste from Peru to Colombia and the first strategies employed in Cocaine shipments. With the increase in demand Pablo and his partner,

Gustavo Gaviria, increase production, open laboratories in the Colombian jungle and begin trafficking through the fleet of an expert marijuana smuggler, Carlos Lehder, as well as associating with other Colombian drug traffickers. On this occasion agent Murphy states: "Pablo's coke flooded in. It didn't take long for Miami to get addicted". In these sequences the image/text relationship is essentially redundant.

In this episode we have the first sequence depicting a historical fact analyzed in the present study; the launch of the cocaine business in Colombia. The audience is shown the extent of the corruption in Colombian institutions; after the police impound 390 kilos of cocaine Pablo goes to the police station and demands an explanation from his accomplice the colonel. The policeman says they need to renegotiate because, with the increase in shipments the value of resale increases, and his commission should increase accordingly. Pablo refuses and the colonel incarcerates Pablo for the first time, in Medellín, in 1976. To give the scene more validity and relevance to the narrative (Juagaribe, 2007) the first showing of the picture is the real mug shot from Pablo's file (Fig. 1).

The picture is a closeup of Escobar looking into the camera with a cynical and derogatory smile, as though he is utterly unconcerned with what is happening. On the other hand, in verbal communication, the narrator warns "this mug shot was gonna cause him a lot of grief down the line", preparing the viewer for the events that would come in later episodes.

The articulation between image and text, between visuality and television style are relevant to the modality of the scene. By considering the picture from a completed situation in which an image, or rather image, support and medium, the options available for the construction of a particular television style have an important function, in this case: the choice of a closeup that fills the frame that aims to express the personality of Pablo Escobar; a overbearing, cynical and intimidating individual.

Figure 1: Real picture of Pablo Escobar at his first arrest.



Escobar's closeup invades the screen, his cynicism causes discomfort and his arrogance is such that the capo seems to not care at all about the fact the picture is for a police file. However, there are cracks and fissures between the narration and the image: both seem to be directly in opposition of each other. The first presents a subject that exudes tranquility and calm and a certain disdain (laughing for your mug shot isn't typical behavior), while the narrator warns us that "it wouldn't be like that" because, the calm and indifference would exact a price: future suffering.

It is as if through that crack we can see all the senses inherent to visuality escape, with visuality itself dealing with forms of seeing and showing that fall within the framework of phenomenological sensoriality, "which never happens in its pure form, only in the conditioning and construction of a specific symbolic mold" (Brea, 2005: 6).

To think of visuality within the context of a television series means taking into account said mold. Television has its own forms of handling resources in favor of configuring a specific message. When considering style the use of the closeup interferes and directs the viewers attention to a determined point: Escobar's personality. In the end, the suffering mentioned in the text didn't happen to just the druglord, it

happened to all of Colombian society who witnessed the horror and violence of his actions. Looking at visuality, when discussing how the brain processes the visual experience Pablo Servio (2014: 198-199) points out selective perception that, although has its physiological explanation, can be understood in the "perception of a cultural, historical and contextual dimension" that, in large part predisposes the audience to focus their attention on certain things, people or events.

Revisiting Brea's statement, for those who the act of seeing and doing are a result of a cultural construction that is both complex and hybrid, I consider the stylistic options another layer to the hybridization. In that sense, I argue that the articulation between visuality, selective perception and television style acts as a truly revealing moment for the storyline, because it is with this photo in hand that the Minister of Justice moves to unmask Pablo Escobar, to denounce him as a drug trafficker, expel him from congress (and public life), provoke the capo to rage and trigger the war on the Colombian state, giving rise to narcoterrorism.

The second sequence analyzed herein, and which also forms part of the historical facts of the beginnings of cocaine trafficking in Colombia, depicts the American war on drugs driven

by the American government who in turn are driven by influential businessmen that, as Murphy explains “were terrified the narco economy would sink the real economy of Miami. Or maybe they were pissed off that they weren’t getting a cut”, considering that millions of dollars a year were flowing out of the US into Colombia. The domestic demand for cocaine drove its foreign production. The relevance of this act also led the producers to include archived images of businessmen meeting with Ronald Reagan as well as the president giving a speech on television networks, confirming its veracity (Figs. 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Businessmen in Miami meeting with Reagan.



Figure 3: Ronald and Nancy Reagan alert the population to the threat of drugs.



Seated next to his wife, on a couch and holding hands, Reagan offers a conservative and alarmist speech when he declares, “they are killing our children”, describing cocaine as “a threat to our national security”. He demonstrates the efforts toward a return to more traditional values; his republican discourse relates the spread of drug use with deteriorating

family values, and the subsequent corruption of the young. According to the president drugs, “are threatening our values and undercutting our institutions”. From here Nancy, now in a close up, with a soft and sweet voice, looks straight into young viewer’s eyes and makes an appeal for life “open your eyes to life; to see it in the vivid colors that God gave us as a precious gift to His children (...) when it comes to drugs and alcohol just say no” (episode Descenso).

Once again in my opinion I think it necessary to recall the articulation between visuality and television style mentioned earlier, to understand the choices made concerning archived footage. In the case of men dressed in traditional suits and ties, contextualized by a narrator that presents them as Miami businessmen, followed by the announcements made by the President seated next to his wife; they all evoke a sense of gravity and urgency in the dealing with a certain act. In the television universe it is common consensus that presidential statements are made regarding subjects of urgency and relevance, that they are carefully prepared and configured to convey the true meaning as intended by the speaker.

However, in terms of interaction between visual and verbal images I understand that, in this case, the crack is not between two dimensions of the same picture, but between pictures presented in sequence. In *Narcos*, in the event that depicts the US government’s actions in the war on drugs, visuality is better fulfilled in the friction between pictures. This happens because the series evidently presents a darker theory as to why Reagan’s war comes about, especially in the following sequence: 1) what might be considered the real reason for the war, in other words, the economic interests at stake and corporate power (an American shot of an oval table surrounded by a group of men in ties pressuring the president to declare war on drug trafficking); and 2) a publicly defensible motive for US society where the president and his

wife appeal to the American public to watch out for their children, drugs are a threat to their families and will break up their families and the bonds between parents and children.

The archived footage of the speech on national television, squarely placed in the middle of the frame in a medium shot, Mr. and Mrs. Reagan ask the American people to shoulder the responsibility of not letting drugs come between them and break down the family unit. By appealing straight to camera and stating "our values" and "our institutions" the president looks to include and share the mission with his fellow Americans. There is no mention of any other geo-economical or political factors that may have led to the issue at hand. It is through visuality that we capture certain patterns and shared values that support the imagining of the problem of drugs and how they are presented in this sequence, demonstrating that "the tension between visual and verbal representations cannot be separated from the struggles in cultural policy and political culture" (Mitchell, 2009: 11).

7. The first assassination

The historical facts of the assassination of Minister Lara Bonilla were for the most part narrated in the third episode *The Men of Always*. Escobar maintained a policy of clientelism and paternalism and believed that, when he formally entered politics, he could do much more for the poor of Colombia. He placed himself on the side of the poor in the struggle against the oligarchs or "the men of always".

After accepting a deal in the millions Fernando Duque acts as Escobar's representative and seeks out the Minister to present Pablo as a good, solid person and philanthropist. Lara Bonilla resists the notion as he has already read in *Forbes* magazine that he was a druglord. He is then provoked by Duque who says, "are

you going to believe all of that American Imperialist Propaganda?". Meanwhile the Minister looks over the documents affirming all the properties Pablo owns in Colombia and the US, the narrator concludes "and just like that, an honest man blinked".

At that moment we discover the concern over this fact at the American embassy in Bogota. The ambassador affirms to the DEA agents: "We cannot have Colombia become a narco state. We need to find someone who can prove this guy is a drug dealer". And in this manner, the US defines the drug problem as an external problem, to be stopped by preventing other countries from producing it. The agents leave to find the evidence and manage to get a copy of Escobar's mug shot from Medellin.

At a meeting with the North American ambassador and the DEA agents, Lara Bonilla appears with the picture in his hands (fig. 4).

Figure 4: the Minister Lara Bonilla discovers Escobar's arrest for drug trafficking.



The meeting takes place in a room at the American embassy and is depicted in a long shot to help position the viewer. Agents Murphy and Javier Peña are next to the door. Sitting across from each are the ambassador and the minister. She seems to be in a comfortable position as if holding information, and he is leaning forward as if anxious to know something important (fig. 5).

Figure 5: meeting between the Minister of Justice and the American Ambassador in Bogota.



Americans are on one side, the Colombian is on the other; the solution to the problem on one side; the cause on the other. The American flag appears in the background behind Lara Bonilla who asks how long the Americans have had the picture in their possession. Immediately following the minister leans back in the high-backed chair and the following dialogue ensues:

- Lara Bonilla: and what am I doing here?
- US Ambassador: It's not America's role to get involved in other countries' elections
- Lara Bonilla: once again the hand of the United States remains invisible
- US Ambassador: your party took money from Escobar. I should think you'd want to get ahead of this
- Lara Bonilla: everyone took money. By the way, it's all American money, so why don't you take this to the press?
- US Ambassador: it should come from you. You're the Minister of Justice (episode The Men of Always)

Of the image/text relationship in this picture we note the manner in which the US intends to act in every decision the Colombian authorities make regarding the drug trade. The Americans come across as rational agents, efficient, capable of providing information to the Colombian government and apply pressure when necessary to influence what measures should be taken.

The choices behind this visual construct are relevant given they provide evidence of a complex network involving technical production and reproduction instruments, social institutions, ways of imagining the world and the presence of an observer/spectator. This is how

visuality becomes a focus of special attention which according to Mitchell (2005; 2009), corresponds to world view practices that process the way we see what we see, under the agency of sociocultural issues that are in a manner of speaking also imprinted on the experience. Television style clearly maintains a dialogue with form of seeing and these sociocultural issues. By calling Lara Bonilla in for a meeting on American soil its feasible to perceive that the picture is a depiction of how the US wants Colombia to adopt their war as their own and unilaterally impose an agenda far removed from the reality and internal conditions of the country.

After announcing their choice, at Pablo's home Jairo Ortega resigns his seat at Congress to allow Escobar to step in. The following sequences alternate between Pablo walking through his home with a triumphant expression, and his arrival at Congress at Bogota's central plaza.

Escobar enters Congress and is greeted by those present, at which the prologue music chimes in at a light and lively pace. As soon as he takes his seat the music changes to more suspenseful chords. Session is open and the Minister is given the floor, who is sitting at the center seat at the rostrum. Without preamble he immediately addresses the issue of monies flowing from drug trafficking and confesses himself guilty of turning a blind eye to the donations made to his campaign coming from that very source. The suspenseful music continues and the feeling of tension returns, there are close ups of Escobar looking visibly uncomfortable with Lara Bonilla's statements and the scene continues with a medium shot with Escobar looking firm and decided (fig. 6).

Immediately following the initial statements Lara Bonilla accuses everyone by saying: "we are a nation of the blind, and in our blindness, we have sold our country to the highest bidder". While he affirms that: "it's time for us to open our eyes and to see the light", he gestures to a security guard next to him asking him to pull off a red veil hanging over a frame on an aisle. The picture is of Pablo's first arrest – whose importance was already pointed out through

he stylistic operations of its first appearance in the series – in augmented size, the very same picture given to him by the North American Ambassador (fig. 7).

Figures 6 and 7: the minister confronts Escobar and reveals the blown up picture at the house chamber, in front of all the congress men and women.



General ruckus explodes while Lara Bonilla approaches Escobar to tell him he is not welcome at the house, he does not belong there. Escobar says nothing, he gets up, walks to the door, turns to the room, and in a frontal medium shot stares straight at the Minister. The soundtrack comes back to suggest a moment of tension that is sustained for as long as Escobar remains standing and staring at the Minister full of hate (fig. 8).

Figure 8: frontal medium shot of Escobar staring in the Minister's direction.



For his safety Lara Bonilla is appointed the Colombian Ambassador to Czechoslovakia. Two weeks out from departure Murphy seeks out

the Minister (fig. 9) and gives him a bulletproof vest and advises him to use it from now on.

- Murphy: I think it might be a good idea for you to wear this until you leave
- Lara Bonilla: you feel responsible, is that it?
- Murphy: Somewhat, yes, sir
- Lara Bonilla: Are you so arrogant to think you had any influence over my actions? That I put my life and the life of my family at risk for American policy objectives? Let me assure you Agent Murphy, outside of providing me with the picture, you did nothing. The decision to speak out was solely mine.

Almost ignoring what was said, Murphy only says:

- Murphy: and I highly advise you to wear this vest, sir
- Lara Bonilla: I will accept this vest out of respect for your concern with my well-being. But I would advise you one thing while you remain in Colombia.
- Murphy: and what is that?
- Lara Bonilla: we accept your help, but never your condescension. When all this is over, Colombians will be the heroes, and the victims. John Wayne only exists in Hollywood
- Murphy: just wear the vest

Again the Minister reacts in the face of North American intervention and it is important to note the image/text relationship in which this reaction takes place.

If in the previous sequence he is on American soil, receiving secret information, here he is inside a Colombian institution receiving advice and protection. Lara Bonilla is in his cabinet office decorated with important symbols in Colombian history: the flag, and a picture of Simon Bolivar. In this environment Bonilla tries to display a little pizzazz, courage and autonomy in relation to certain attitudes and the possible consequences. He tries to impose limits on American political action in the war on drugs. The staging and scenario symbolize the tension between the politician's arrogance and the policies of the United States, as well as the uncomfortable yet weak reaction from

the Colombian authorities regarding US interference.

However, as is the case the colonel's corruption Murphy's performance once again denotes a certain fragility of the Colombian state and, in this case the need for American institutions and agents to step in and offer protection. Otherwise, why couldn't the bulletproof vest have been offered by an agent with the Colombian National Police?

8. Conclusions

Although *Narcos* is not a production created for the conventional television audience, the similarities it has with narrative models instituted by television make it possible to subject this fictional narrative to an analysis of television style. Communication media, in particular fictional television, decisively contribute to setting the configuration of visibility regimes. They do so paying attention and remaining connected to broader contextual and socio-political affairs as required by their own objective: to promote interaction, find commonalities and communicate.

In *Narcos* the context of the 1980s and the political and economic tension of the time

emerge from representation and the visual proposal. In a way, the series was capable of narrating the war on drugs, of providing the viewer with a perspective on the political conflicts and disputes surrounding depictions of Latin America, especially Colombia, and its place in the transnational circumstances brought about by the drug trade.

Notes

1. http://www.diariodepernambuco.com.br/app/noticia/viver/2015/08/20/internas_viver,593522/narcos-cinco-curiosidades-da-serie-de-jose-padilha-sobre-cartel-de-pablo-escobar.shtml

2. From the original: "style is their texture, their surface, the web that holds together their signifiers and through which their signifieds are communicated.

3. Only when a historical analysis requires taking up all the programs of the same genre to identify patterns, a critical appraisal is still problematic, as Butler acknowledges, due to a lack of specific evaluation patterns in television aesthetics.

4. Available at <http://www.adorocinema.com/noticias/series/noticia-114168/>

5. Available at <http://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/revista-da-tv/jose-padilha-diretor-de-tropa-de-elite-explica-trafico-de-cocaina-em-narcos-serie-sobre-pablo-escobar-17266382>

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¿How to quote?

Rocha, S. (2018). El Visualidad política latinoamericana en *Narcos*: un análisis a través del estilo televisivo. *Comunicación y Medios*, 27(37), 106-118. doi:10.5354/0719-1529.2018.48572