

Narcos and the Promotion of an U.S. (Informal) Cultural Empire Based on Processes of Stereotyping and Comparison

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Abstract

According to postcolonial critic Edward Said, European imperialism was not only based on arms; it was also based on forms of knowledge affiliated with domination and on a vocabulary that constructed and promoted the inferior Other. Contemporary practices of imperialism may be more subtle but are no less powerful. After the end of traditional and formal European colonization, the United States is still exerting influence on other countries, particularly Latin American countries, either in a formal, political, and interventional way, or, as I propose, in an informal way that privileges cultural ideological strategies and knowledge production. By reformulating and readapting Said's concept of Orientalism, my paper suggests that the concept of Latinism illuminates the workings of an imperialist gaze in representations of Latinos in the media. By its promotion, the U.S. informal cultural empire introduces and installs negative portrayals of Latinos as the perceived ethnic Other. This presentation of stereotypes can influence the audience's view on Latinos and thus poses an undesirable factor obstructing constructive tendencies in a globalized world, an argument I elaborate on by focusing on the first two seasons of the Netflix exclusive series Narcos. The series' presentation of stereotypes is accomplished by different practices of comparing on the visual, verbal, and structural/productional levels. By exploring the construction of Latino Otherness on these three levels, I assert that cinematic stereotypes are used to depict the Latino Other in an inferior way in the majority of the cases, simultaneously representing the U.S.-American characters and culture as superior.

Keywords: US Informal Imperialism, Latino Otherness, Latinism, Stereotyping, Narcos (Netflix)

1. Introduction

In his well-known publication *Orientalism*, postcolonial critic Edward Said describes the various disciplines, institutions, mentalities, and discourses by which Europeans experienced the Near and Middle East, referred to as 'the Orient,' in the course of the consolidation of European colonies in the 19th century. By shifting the study of colonialism "towards its discursive operations, showing the intimate connection between language and forms of knowledge developed for the study of cultures and the history of colonialism and imperialism" (Young, *Colonial Desire* 159), [1] Said's study established that European imperialism was not only based on arms, but also on forms of knowledge affiliated with domination and on the vocabulary with which the Oriental Other was described in contrast to the European citizen (*Culture & Imperialism* 8). In this essay,

I take evaluative stereotyping as unfavorable comparisons in which one group always fares better than the other. In a colonial or imperialist context, the practices of comparing performed by European agents were characterized by implicit claims of dominance and power over the perceived ethnic Other. They predominantly focused on differences between cultural groups.

Relying on Edward Said's definition of imperialism as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory" (*Culture & Imperialism* 8), my article will investigate how contemporary practices of imperialism that are still put into practice after the end of traditional and formal colonization by several European nations may be more subtle but are no less powerful. Today it is the United States that is exerting influence on other countries, particularly Latin American countries, [2] either in a political,

interventionalist, and thus more formal way, or in a cultural, ideological, and hence more informal way. As Michael Doyle (qtd. in Said, *Culture & Imperialism* 8) specifies,

[e]mpire is a relationship, informal or formal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.

Postcolonial and hemispheric studies strive to move beyond the inflexible black and white portrayals of the history of colonization by focusing on dynamic shifts, the richness of the coexistence between, and the hybridity of the various cultures on the American continent. However, entrenched stereotyping processes in cultural relations are still put into practice regularly, also through practices of comparing.

The hegemonic dominance and cultural leadership of one social group or nation over another, as well as the silent consent and acceptance of that superiority and influence by the inferior group is no longer established by governmental institutions but by the mass media. In order to account for the imperialist gaze on work in representations of Latinos [3] in the media, I propose to reformulate and readapt Edward Said's abovementioned concept of Orientalism in terms of 'Latinism'. [4] By promoting certain television and Netflix series, the U.S. informal cultural empire introduces and installs the Latinos portrayed as the perceived ethnic Other. My article analyzes constructions of Otherness particularly in the Netflix series *Narcos*. Other publications on *Narcos* either focus primarily on the opening sequence of the series, discovering principles of its creation and providing a microanalysis of the 'collage technique' from a productional point of view, or investigate visualities of Latin America and historical events in Colombia in the series, trying to understand the complex relationships between crime, economy, politics, and corruption by viewing *Narcos* from a visual studies perspective. In contrast, I will focus on Latino Otherness and illustrate how it

is depicted from a U.S. perspective. The series' presentation of stereotypes is accomplished by different practices of comparing on the visual, verbal, and structural/productional levels.

2. From Orientalism to Latinism and on the U.S. Cultural Informal Empire

Introducing his concept of Orientalism, Edward Said radically questions the systems of values supported by former colonizing nations and offers a crucial critique of Eurocentrism (Lenz 317) by examining dominating European discourses of knowledge concerned with the construction of the Oriental Other (Culler 145). The Orient is seen from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, it is constructed as a European utopia and invention which, since antiquity, has provoked a certain fascination as a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences" (Said, *Orientalism* 1). On the other hand, in spite of its great history and its lure of exoticism, the Orient (considered from a European perspective) has remained static and did not develop, in contrast to European culture, which has maintained a certain dynamism and has progressed as part of its historical development (Prashad 174).

The construction of alterity is easily accomplished by the attribution of certain values to both the Orient and the Occident (Prashad 175). The relationship between the East and the West is a relationship of power establishing a pattern of hierarchy in which the West adopts a dominant position (Said, *Orientalism* 5; Prashad 175). The conceived difference between the familiar, productive, and dynamic compared and contrasted to the strange, lazy, and static was used as justification for imperialism and colonialism because if "the Orient was primitive and barbaric, then it was up to the enlightened West to civilize and tame it, and at the same time rescue and preserve the ancient knowledge and wisdom held by the great traditions of the East" (Wise 23). As applied ideology, Orientalism powerfully reinforces the dichotomy and is supported by institutions, scholarship, and different styles of representation (Said,

Orientalism 2).

As Stuart Hall (234ff.) explains, difference is fundamental for the production of meaning, the establishment of symbolic order, the construction of individual and collective identities, and, especially important in this context, social inclusion and exclusion. The perceived difference between two cultures is shown by the installation of binary oppositions, which do not only construct an unjust hierarchy “swallowing up all distinctions in their rather rigid two-part structure” (Hall 235), but also exist to confirm the dominance of one group. According to Said (*Orientalism* 227), the generalizations which are produced by dichotomizing processes are strengthened by anthropology, historical events, and linguistic speech acts, as well as by the theses on natural selection put forward by the natural scientist Charles Darwin. Stuart Hall offers a number of responses to the question of why difference matters, for instance, by introducing an anthropological explanation of difference. For anthropologists, difference represents the basis of culture as it attributes meaning to objects and things by designating them to different positions (Hall 236). Cultures which claim to be stable, like in the European case at hand, “require things to stay in their appointed place” (Hall 236), thus trying to establish symbolic boundaries to keep their own culture isolated and maintain a ‘pure’ identity. While defining one’s own culture, a dichotomy is established by comparing oneself with the other entity and by stating what one is *not*. The aforementioned symbolic confines are central to cultures:

Marking ‘difference’ leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal. However, paradoxically, it also makes ‘difference’ powerful, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order. (Hall 237)

The objective of postcolonial studies is to illuminate this region of taboo and highlight the cultural hybridity which becomes possible in the category between the two oppositional terms. At the same time, eventual contradictions can be

uncovered (Ashcroft et al. 21). However, as there are various categories of difference, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and class, an intersection of categories of difference may lead to the collective marginalization of a people.

The representational practice of comparison employed to construct and reinforce notions of difference is called stereotyping. Ramírez Berg (13) comments on the difficulty of finding a single definition of the concept ‘stereotype.’ Still, most scholars would define it as such: “A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing” (Oxford Dictionaries: “Stereotype.”). Drawing on Richard Dyer, Stuart Hall affirms that we make sense of the world by using types which are classified according to our culture, a common and necessary data filtering process which runs parallel to the construction of difference as a basis of culture. A “type is any simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or “development” is kept to a minimum” (Dyer qtd. in Hall 257). In the beginning, this mechanism of comparison by creating different categories might be completely neutral. In the process of stereotyping, however, the categories mentioned are imbued with values. Those values imply the assignment of negative and clearly reductive qualities to other individuals or groups. Stereotyping operates as a shared and consensual group phenomenon (Ramírez Berg 14f.; 23): “The attitudes about what constitutes the norms of the society go more or less unquestioned [...] [by the dominant group] and mark a boundary between what the society considers normal and socially acceptable and what it does not” (Ramírez Berg 24). What is not embraced as the norm by the dominant part of a society consequently represents the Other. Therefore, stereotyping can be considered a strategy of group splitting and exclusion (Hall 258). The reduction of complex characteristics to simplistic traits and the exaggeration of certain features (Hall 258) help to create a cognitive gap which is often visually represented, especially regarding ethnic and racial differences (Herrera 135).

Postcolonial revisionism in the 1980s did not only focus on the asymmetrical relationship between colonizer and colonized, but also underlined the necessity to reorganize the canon, include marginalized works by minority groups, and reconsider the nation as key organizing unit of scholarship on cultural production (Bauer 234-236). [5] Despite the attempted turn away from U.S. exceptionalism towards hemispheric transnationalism, seeking to deflate U.S. hegemony and break with dichotomous thinking (McClennen 174), "U.S. power has been brought to bear unevenly in the region by diverse agents, in a variety of sites and conjunctures, and through diverse transnational arrangements" (Gilbert 5). Fernando Coronil (x) goes even further by arguing that Latin America can be considered as the region "where the United States has most forcefully practiced new modes of imperial domination as the world's major capitalist power." As compellingly argued by the contributing authors of *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease), "Latin America has been largely absent from the internal dialogue that has established the field of postcolonial studies in the metropolitan centers" (Coronil x). Nevertheless, it seems to be useful to introduce the term 'Latinism,' which represents a play on Edward Said's Orientalism and can be defined as "the construction of Latin America and its inhabitants and of Latinos in [...] [the United States] to justify the United States' imperialistic goals" (Ramírez Berg 4). [6] Furthermore, it is meaningful to expand the concept of Orientalism as it "cannot contain all aspects of a globalised world" (Rossow 402). Lastly, it seems important to mention that the concept of Latinism does not hark back to Spanish colonization of Latin America and the discursive constructions and repercussions of the inhabitants of the "New World," but refers to the discursive and comparative practices involved in informal cultural imperialistic approaches and interventions of the United States.

"Imperialism is over. No nation will be world leader in the way modern European nations were" (Hardt and Negri xiv). This strong statement by the authors of *Empire* is reinforced by Lois Tyson, who explains in her chapter "Postcolonial criticism" (*Critical Theory Today*

425) that traditional colonialism "is no longer practiced as it was between the late fifteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, through the direct, overt administration of governors and educators from the colonizing country". Today, it is not imperialism, in the sense of colonialism, which still determines global structures, but rather an informal and cultural imperialism. Postcolonial studies helped to uncover that the late 20th century's form of U.S. power on an international scale has been problematic, resulting in the fact that the United States is more and more referred to as a cultural Empire (Streeby 2007: 95; 100). From the 1930s onwards, the United States positioned itself as an external hegemonic presence in Latin America by expanding "functions and programs [...] [which] diversified the social relations, experiences, and sympathies" (Stern 60) of the cultural center in Latin America, which is conceptualized as cultural periphery (Stern 59f.). [7] After the Second World War, political leadership shifted and the United States assumed an authorial leadership role in international economy and globalization processes (Hardt and Negri xiii). In the last century, there has been a development from Eurocentrism to U.S.-centrism combined with U.S. exceptionalism, using the "American culture as the standard to which all other cultures are negatively contrasted" (Tyson 420).

As Edward Said (*Culture & Imperialism* 7) shows, there is a connection between U.S. imperial politics and culture. There are myriads of different approaches for a definition of culture; for my line of argumentation, I opt for Raymond Williams' definition. As delineated by Williams, the definition of culture has changed over the last centuries. In the 16th century, it meant the cultivation of land (Young, *Colonial Desire* 31). At the turn of the 19th century, however, the term was used to designate the result of a process of cultivation of mind. Culture can thus be seen as civilization [8] and cultural products as results of processes of development (Wise 4). The idea was accompanied by the belief in culture as sort of moral education - not only concerning one's own culture, but also other cultures - therefore seen "as ideal that Europe had achieved but other countries were found wanting" (Wise 5). Tying into that notion, culture

functions as a means of comparison and tool for moral evaluation (Wise 5). Colonialist discourse uses this definition of culture and “constructs figures of alterity and manages their flows in what unfolds as a complex dialectical structure. The negative construction of non-European others is finally what founds and sustains European identity itself” (Hardt and Negri 124). The colonialist ideology is always based on the presupposition of a perceived superiority of the colonizer in contrast to a supposed inferiority of the colonized, who, according to that logic, lacks a civilized and sophisticated culture (Tyson 419). Furthermore, culture is considered a widely distributed set of practices comprising music, literature, art, leisure-time activities, and entertainment, amongst others. These practices compose everyday life and work to construct a sense of cultural and national identity. In the case of the informal cultural imperialism promoted by the United States, culture is offensively brought into connection with the nation and functions as a vehicle of identity construction by enforcing xenophobic distinctions between “us” and “them,” establishing hierarchies of race and legitimizing them by portraying the United States as a “great” and exceptionalist nation (*Culture & Imperialism* xiii; 7). [9] Thus, U.S. national identity is constructed through differences in comparative relation to other national identities and cultures (Silva Gruesz 20f.). Cultural meaning is imposed from the outside and Latin Americans are subjected to U.S. cultural production ever since (Hall 2). Here it is important to point out a diversification regarding the main actors: It is no longer only the government, but also (inter-) national corporations (Tyson 425) like Netflix, Inc. and cultural agents that construct Latin America, in this particular case Colombia, as having an intrinsic deficit or vacuum. Simultaneously, by “channeling [...] massive energies into the production of images and texts” (Salvatore 71), they legitimate the presence of the U.S. and ascribe meaning to the mission and role of U.S.-Americans in the region.

3. Cultural Imperialism Illustrated: The Construction of Otherness in *Narcos*

According to Charles Ramírez Berg, there are different ways of dealing with the Other for cultural agents, namely the degradation of the Other which legitimizes power asymmetry and domination, the idealization of the Other which offers a cultural critique of one’s own culture, and the recognition of the Other as equal (25ff.). The preliminary stage preceding a cultural interaction with the Other always consists of comparing and evaluating differences that automatically degrade the other group. As will be shown and argued in the analysis of the Netflix series *Narcos*, the Latino Other is constructed in a negative and degrading way, which completely reduces their complexity and the interaction of social groups. The construction of stereotypes is inextricably intertwined with different practices of comparing which are “very easy to identify, quote and denounce, and yet [...] impossible to eliminate” (Rosello qtd. in Herrera 139). These comparisons can be detected on the visual, the verbal, as well as the structural and productional level.

Narcos is a Netflix exclusive series, first aired in August 2015. The first two seasons of ten episodes tell the story of the Colombian drug lord Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria. [10] The show vividly depicts his rise in the drug trafficking world and success in the illegal transportation of cocaine into the United States. With the increasing number of U.S. citizens who are dying of drug abuse, the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) steps in and tries to help the Colombian military track down Escobar. The hunt for Escobar drags on until December 1993 when he initially survives a shootout with the military but is eventually executed right after getting caught. Selected examples of scenes in the following sections illustrate how the stereotype of the Latino as the ethnic Other is construed, reinforced, and underlined in the Netflix series.

3.1 Otherness on the Visual Level

This first section analyzes some examples of the representation of Latino Otherness on the

visual level. The U.S.-American main character of the series, Steve Murphy (played by the U.S.-American actor Boyd Holbrook), represents what Ramírez Berg (67) calls “the sun around which the film narrative revolves.” This is not only because he occupies the important position of the narrative voice-over, but also because of his appearance as a “white, handsome, middle-aged, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, and obviously Anglo-Saxon male” (67).

Murphy sets Colombia against the United States and insinuates his country’s faultlessness. The scene in which the DEA and the Colombian Colonel Horacio Carrillo try to catch a group of Escobar’s *sicarios* constitutes a striking example (cf. figure 1).



Fig. 1: The Roadblock (*Narcos* I,3)

Murphy makes clear that the roadblock set up by the Colombians would never meet U.S.-American standards. Boastfully commenting, “Excuse me for saying so...but this isn’t much of a roadblock, is it?” and simultaneously folding his arms and looking down on Carrillo with a smirk, Murphy represents the stereotypical image of a U.S. American and his sense of exceptionality (*Narcos* I,3). [11]

Murphy’s last scenes of the second season reproduce traditional stereotypical constructions of U.S.-American superiority in contrast to the Latino Other’s inferiority, apparent through practices of comparing. For instance, during the military discussion in the scene before Escobar is caught, the Colombian General Hugo Martínez gives the orders. Still, the prominent element in the picture is Steve Murphy sitting amidst Colombian soldiers in a regular red t-shirt (cf. figure 2). Everyone appears in full combat gear

to capture Colombia’s most dangerous criminal; it seems that because of his civilian clothes, Murphy has either not realized the seriousness of the situation or believes that they are going to fail once again in their attempt to catch Escobar. Possibly, he thinks of himself as invincible as it is clear to him that the U.S. Americans will finally triumph over their enemies, no matter how challenging the manhunt has been before.



Fig. 2: Murphy amidst Colombian Soldiers (*Narcos* II,10)

According to Mario Arango Jaramillo (32), with the emergence of the narco business as a subculture, a new male figure appeared, whom he calls the “nuevo patrón machista”. Previously, the paisa had completely channelled his *machismo* and aggression into economic and entrepreneurial success. However, with the increasing modernization and industrialization of the Colombian economy in the second half of the 20th century, it is not only *machismo* in terms of drug trafficking which has risen, but also in terms of social and physical aggression as moral and ethical values underwent significant change. One characteristic trait of the “nuevo patrón machista” is that he always carries a gun with him which is somehow integrated into the person’s physical appearance, complementing the image of the tough guy and offering him a sense of safety. Furthermore, his conduct towards women changed radically as the nouveau riche is unfaithful towards his wife and surrounded by lovers (Arango Jaramillo 32-36). The mentioned change of morality can be considered inherent in some of the series’ characters. In general, all Colombian drug lords are displayed as “nuevos patrones machistas”. Furthermore, they unite some of the character traits of the *bandido* stereotype. The bandido stereotype is one of the six distinct basic Latino

stereotypes in cinematic productions developed by Charles Ramírez Berg (39). According to him, the *bandido* is “vicious, cruel, treacherous, shift, and dishonest” in behaviour and psychologically is “irrational, overtly emotional, and quick to resort to violence” (Ramírez Berg 68). Two of the myths characterizing the cinematic representation of the Latino Other according to Woll (108) are also frequently reiterated, namely the graphic portrayal of excessive violence and the fact that “no matter how violent the Latin American, he is unable to cope with either the strength or the superior technology of the North American hero”. [12] The following paragraph briefly explores how the *bandido* stereotype and these mentioned myths comparing the Latino Other with the U.S. American are cinematically reinforced in the series.

Throughout the series, Murphy’s counterpart Pablo Escobar is presented as a two-faced character. According to Jorge J. Barrueto, the representation of stereotypes in film becomes part of a network of knowledge the audience can access at any time. “The ethnic images and cultural symbolism” (Barrueto 19) through which the character of Pablo Escobar is construed clearly embodies and evokes Latinism. A process closely tied to Postcolonialism, namely the mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized, is noticeable in this context. [13] The nouveau riche as “patrón machista” is shown to mimic and imitate the U.S. American “in dress [...] and lifestyle” (Tyson 421). Since he owns the U.S.-American cocaine market and his enormous wealth, Escobar attaches importance to a U.S.-American lifestyle. Listed by the *Forbes* magazine as one of the richest persons on earth, he even gained positive attention in the United States.

However, Escobar is never shown regarding his own culture as inferior compared to the U.S.-American culture; he is always depicted as a proud Colombian who does not want to leave his country in order to live somewhere else (*Narcos* I,5). However, when the Colombian government subsequently agrees to a policy concerning the extradition of drug traffickers to the United States, the United States and its imperialist and political interventionist agenda become Escobar’s number one enemy, even though he

admires the United States’ exceptionalism and the idea of the American Dream.

In the end, after shooting and executing Escobar, Murphy’s narrative voice-over tells the audience of how he perceived the drug lord after having chased him for such a long time:

All this time hunting him and just like that I’m looking down at Pablo fucking Escobar. For years I’d been building this son of a bitch up in my head. What a monster he’d be. But there’s the thing. When you lay eyes on him, the devil’s a real letdown. Just a man. Beard grows if he doesn’t shave. Fat and shoeless. You take a good long look at evil, and it reminds you of one. (*Narcos* II,10)

Murphy’s description of Pablo Escobar as “[j]ust a man” (*Narcos* II,10) contrasts with the characterization of this character as the evil Other fighting against the United States’ good mission. Thus, it becomes clear that the whole representation of the two main characters served exactly the purpose of contrasting “us vs. them” and to reinstate the stereotyping dichotomy. As Jorge J. Barrueto (26) convincingly argues, “[t]he discourse of Otherness requires that the monster must be killed, so a new day can begin.” In the end, despite all the difficulties of Escobar’s manhunt and Escobar’s genius and “career of staying ahead of cops” (Steve Murphy in *Narcos* II,2), the United States is portrayed as triumphant over Escobar, the Latino Other.

3.2 Otherness on the Verbal Level

The Latino Other is often linguistically depreciated by using swearwords. Furthermore, Colombians are represented physically and technologically inferior to the U.S. Americans and as inherently violent. While giving background information on a DEA-agent who was tortured and murdered in Mexico by a drug cartel, Steve Murphy remarks almost aggressively: “What the fuck were they thinking? They could kill an American government agent and get away with it? Uncle Sam doesn’t fuck around. The

cocksuckers paid in blood. They went after them so hard, every single narco in the world got the message that the DEA is off limits" (*Narcos* I,3). Obviously, he supports revenge to make a stance and considers a violent intervention necessary. Murphy presents himself, the U.S. government, the organization he works for, and his partner as omnipotent against all odds as he states: "We were like the Bermuda Triangle. You get too close to us, you disappear" (*Narcos* I,3). The United States' intervention is displayed as necessary to solve the Colombian drug problem and political ineptness: "Now Pablo had someone to fear: us. It's one fucking man against the United States of America" (*Narcos* I,4). [14]

The verbal depreciation of the Other is also reflected in mocking and ironic remarks, for instance, in the narrator's comment on the dead bodies of those who had been killed and later arranged by the death squad "Los Pepes": "We came up with a name for their displays. *Colombian folk art*" (*Narcos* II,7; emphasis added). The remark is macabre and reveals how Colombian art is seen as worthless if it does not depict violence, which in turn is considered a Hispanic cultural value (Barrueto 22).

By reinforcing stereotypes though the practice of comparing, the series clarifies that Murphy thinks that the Colombian military is incapable of doing anything against Escobar, even if they have the appropriate equipment. In the first minutes of the second season, Murphy summarizes the events of the last episode of the previous season:

Let me break it down for you. Four thousand soldiers, a 250-man team of Colombia's elite forces, tens of thousands of rounds fired, seven dogs, and four fuckin' helicopters. Pablo Escobar was surrounded in the middle of fuckin' nowhere. There was no way he was getting out of this one...right? (*Narcos* II,1)

This remark also creates suspense, as it becomes clear that Pablo Escobar is about to escape again. This is shown in the next scene, where soldiers just let him pass out of fear that they and their families would be haunted by Escobar's furious, ghostly apparition. The

scene where a soldier tells his companions to not "speak a word of this to anyone, understood" (*Narcos* II,1) underlines the absurdity of the course of the events. Using the swearword "fuckin'" various times, Murphy shows his anger about the failed attempt to catch Escobar, blaming the Colombian government and military since they could not define a clear agreement on how to proceed.

Not only the military is incapable of acting correctly in the series; the government and political institutions are less rigorous in comparison to the United States' legal system, as Murphy confirms: "If you were a narco in Colombia, jail time meant banging girls, watching movies, hanging with the fellas. Grease the right hands and you'd get a reduced sentence for good behavior. It was a fucking joke. Back home, it was a whole different deal" (*Narcos* I,4).

However, Steve Murphy also admits that the United States' tactics may not always work, but because of multiple interventionist actions throughout Latin America, the U.S. government knows how to solve problems effectively. The narrator prominently highlights his government's successful actions by boastfully presenting them as the heroes who "could get shit done" (*Narcos* II,1). This way, their own criminal acts, their "bad stories" against humanity, are covered:

Best way to make a bad story go away is to come up with a better story and sell it hard. This is *one of the cornerstones of American foreign policy*, and one we learned through the years of trial and error in Latin America, Chile, Guatemala, Panama. Getting caught with your pants down sucks, but if at the same time you give the folks a big win, like, say, dismantling the second biggest drug cartel in the world, well, then nobody's paying attention to the bad story. They're too busy patting you on the back. (*Narcos* II,9; emphasis added)

The selected examples taken from the series clearly underline the argument that Colombia and its people are presented as inferior through verbal dialogue. In comparison, even though the government's measures are not always effective, the United States is shown as superior.

3.3 Otherness on the Structural and Productional Level

Having briefly explored how practices of comparing accomplish the presentation of stereotypes on the visual and the verbal levels, the third and last section deals with the representation of Otherness on the structural and productional level. As stereotypical devices are “deployed at every cinematic register” (Ramírez Berg 42), it seems important to show how the technology of film itself, including the choice of light, framing, and image composition, works to augment the comparative stereotyping in the series.

Hollywood productions tend to represent a series’ content displaying Latin America using saturated color. As James Monaco (“2009: 136) explains in *How to Read a Film*, the “saturation of the color is a measure of its amount”. When speaking of “saturated light,” one normally refers to images which seem to be shot through a slightly darker filter, not representing the setting in a transparent way. In U.S. audio-visual productions, a filter is applied to obscure current realities in Latin American countries, misleading the audience in order to highlight U.S.-American ideological values and disparage another cultural group as inferior. In the series *Narcos*, “Hispanic drug milieu [is] achieved with [...] saturated colors” (Barrueto 42). The distorted filmic demonstration of light inevitably leads to the reinforcement of common stereotypes deliberately drawing a misconceived picture of Latin American cultures (Woll 5). Furthermore, the always gloomy and suspenseful atmosphere is created by scenes shot at night, as the image below illustrates (cf. figure 3). In all cases, Colombia is presented in darker light hues and shades than its counterpart the United States, which is shown without using a saturating filter (*Narcos* I,1). Dark images are shown when presenting DEA’s operations against Colombian drug traffickers on the streets of Miami, thus depicted as a threat to U.S. social order.



Fig. 3: Before the Shooting (*Narcos* I,1)

The image composition in the example in figure 3 is held in very dark colors. Only diegetic light elements like the car headlights in the background or the dimmed illumination of the bar serve to illuminate the scene. The atmosphere is gloomy and the audience has the impression that something is going to happen soon, which is exactly the case. The Search Bloc attacks some of Escobar’s *sicarios* that night. The composition of light reinforces the notion of Colombia as a dangerous place to be, especially at night.

The frame “determines the limit of the image” (Monaco 206). Referring to David Bordwell, Charles Ramírez Berg explains that “typical compositions in Hollywood films are centered” (43). They “work with a privileged zone of screen space resembling a T; the upper one-third and the central vertical third of the screen constitute the ‘center’ of the shot” (Bordwell qtd. in Ramírez Berg 43). As exemplified by the following image from the series (cf. figure 4), the one-third in the center of the frame shows the white, heterosexual, and Christian male hero, while the rest of the frame shows minor characters and stereotypes (Ramírez Berg 44).



Fig. 4: The Hearing (*Narcos* I,3)

In addition to the image's dark colors, Steve Murphy's posture hints at his dominant position; the framing is also significant, as he takes up the privileged zone of the screen. On his sides, thus not in the center of the image composition, two employees of the Bogotá airport have marginalized positions, construing them in a stereotypical light. The man on the left bends his head, a body posture which underlines his submissive position. The shoulder posture of the man on the right shows resignation. Both of them do not look at Murphy, a fact that confirms the agent's superiority.

In general, the image composition or *mise en scène* in *Narcos* is characterized by a highly symmetrical arrangement of the characters and scenery. [15] Comparing the two following images, we see that Steve Murphy and Pablo Escobar are near the window leading to the rooftops of a block of houses. Both hold a gun, however Escobar seems to run for shelter, almost sitting down passively and not using his gun;] Murphy is shown actively using his gun and jumping out of the window. The discrepancy between the two characters is furthermore emphasized by their physical appearance. Escobar in his blue t-shirt and "[f]at and shoeless" (Steve Murphy in *Narcos* II, 10) is clearly depicted as being the inferior of the two (cf. figure 5) as compared to Murphy in his red t-shirt and neat appearance (cf. figure 6).

Conclusion

From a transnationalist perspective, the Americas has to be seen as a zone of negotiation; these 'negotiations' are asymmetrical. The intentional and merely superficially concealed operation of U.S. imperialism constitutes a fact that indicates an ongoing process of coercion between the two cultural spaces. Similar to the European colonialists' connection related to the Orient, which was regarded as a fascinating exotic place yet backward and inferior culture, informal actors in the United States stimulate a discourse and knowledge production on what is construed as the Latino Other, which can be referred to as Latinism. Hereby, ideological values are not explicitly promoted, but rather implicitly transported through powerful mass media whose target group is an international audience. The asymmetrical relation advanced by the United States serves to justify any formal or informal intervention on the political or cultural level. It is corroborated by the perceived Otherness of Latin American cultures, which are displayed as inherently different to the Anglo-Saxon one. To depict the Latino Other in an inferior way and simultaneously represent the U.S.-American characters and culture as superior, cinematic stereotypes are utilized. These mediated stereotypes "have historical roots in racist attitudes that existed for various



Fig. 5: Escobar (*Narcos* II, 10)



Fig. 6: Murphy (*Narcos* II, 10)

social and political reasons [...] prior to their inclusion in media” (Wilson and Gutiérrez 78). Even though there are several possibilities to take a different stance on the series, in the majority of the cases, the audience is not able to reconsider the events presented as true. The analysis of the different levels of comparison on which Colombian Otherness is depicted in *Narcos*, namely the visual, verbal, and structural and production level, foregrounds a critical viewing of the series.

In order to detect and understand how informal imperialism works and how different techniques are used to advance the United States’ informal cultural empire as an audience, it seems useful to have a ‘checklist’ available while watching. Referring to Clara E. Rodríguez (240), it becomes obvious that the spectator can actively contribute to the uncovering of hidden stereotypes, for instance by asking some of the following questions while watching: “Who is telling this story?”; “Who else could tell us stories?”; “Given the perspective of the camera, which characters does the director want us to follow?” Those questions could help the audience sharpen their understanding of filmic productions (Rodríguez 240) and how cultural imperialism and informal stereotyping processes based on differences presented through practices of comparing work.

Endnotes

[1] It is important to establish the further utilization of the terms “imperialism” and “colonialism.” As Young (2001: 15) explains, both “involve [...] forms of subjugation of one people by another,” a reason why the concepts sometimes appear to be interchangeable; in Edward Said’s work, for instance, there is no distinction made. However, Robert J.C. Young argues that a differentiation has to be made. Colonialism stands for a pragmatic practice whose primary objective is the extension of state power, whereas imperialism refers to a policy of state which focuses on the aim of ideological domination of other people. Hereby, power is exercised through political and economic influence and driven by the facilitation of institutions and ideologies (Young 16-27).

[2] Over the course of the centuries, the countries of Latin America have been subject to a myriad of imperialist impositions, which also involved the infliction of culture and ideology promoted by Spain, Portugal, France, as well as Great Britain, and later on by the United States.

[3] In this article, I use the term ‘Latino’ for people with Latin

American origin regardless of their gender.

[4] The term Latinism was coined by Charles Ramírez Berg (4) and will be explained below.

[5] The hegemonic nation is a deeply ideological construct, which in the course of its formation involves “processes of self-definition and self-consolidation as often dependent [...] on the persecution of differences” (Weinbaum 176), and whose fictional character is given permanent justifiability and authority through political and constitutional processes based on imperial and capitalist forms of (economic) exploitation (Weinbaum 176f.). According to Hobsbawm, nations recognized as political states have been generating “themselves by inventing traditions that enabled them to constitute populations as historical and cultural entities meaningfully joined over time and in space” (qtd. in Weinbaum 178).

[6] In his article “Orientalism, Globalism and the Possibility of Alternative Systems of Representation,” Holger Rossow (2004) argues that there is a considerable number of similarities between globalism and Orientalism that both “refer to materially founded relations of power and domination and culturally constructed discourses that simultaneously conceal these relations and justify behavioural patterns or specific actions that sustain them” (Rossow 2004: 395).

[7] Gilbert M. Joseph (12) explains that neo-imperialist or informal imperialist enterprises manage “a stream of flows unified by the logic of profits, power, and a single hegemonic culture. From the center flow[...] commodities; capital; technology; cultural artifacts [sic!]; and military power, equipment, and expertise – in order to reproduce more of the same”. To summarize in the context of the article, the American way of life is exported to Latin American countries (Gilbert 1998: 13).

[8] A person is civilized and has culture when appropriately educated and trained (Wise 2008: 4).

[9] The notion of American exceptionalism foregrounds the uniqueness of a nation which “was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be *understood* differently” (Shafer qtd. in Paul 14; emphasis in the original).

[10] Season III was released on September 1, 2017 which, after Pablo Escobar’s death, no longer focuses on the Medellín cartel, but on the Cali cartel. The setting of the fourth season (*Narcos Mexico*) is no longer in Colombia but Mexico as it relates the Guadalajara cartel’s story. It was released on November 16, 2018.

[11] The respective reference in the series will be indicated in short form: *Narcos* I,1. In this case, “I” stands for the first season, “1” for the first episode of *Narcos*.

[12] This holds true for all drug kingpins in the series except the members of the Cali cartel, who successfully eschew a fatal encounter with the U.S. Americans, as they also make common cause with them.

[13] The phenomenon was introduced by Homi K. Bhabha and “it reflects both the desire of colonized individuals to be accepted by the colonizing culture and the shame experienced by colonized individuals concerning their own

culture, which they were programmed to see as inferior" (Tyson 421).

[14] As Murphy explains in the first episode of the first season, it is not the first time that the United States intervened in Latin America, as they "helped Pinochet seize power" (*Narcos* 1,1) in 1973.

[15] *Mise en scène* is generally understood as "the arrangement of the scenery, props, etc. on the stage of a theatrical production or on the set of a film" (Oxford Dictionaries: "Mise en Scène.").

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