

Drugs, Thugs, and Divas
Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas
in Latin America

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Being Narco

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NARCO-SENSIBILITY AND THE
GLOBAL RETURN OF THE OTHER

Narco-dramas, like good melodrama, fail to live up to the standards of good taste defined by established elite and intellectual cultural norms. Rather, they repeatedly struggle to express and develop the same antinorms and feelings that are continuously criticized and discouraged in all culturally acceptable institutions such as schools, the media, and religious institutions. In this melodramatic genre, violence is at its most extreme, and weapons and thuggish behavior take center stage. The genre thus manages to completely alienate those with supposedly upper- or even middle-class sensibilities who look for subtext, complicated plots, and sophisticated writing in the movies they enjoy. These violent drug lord films, however, manage to disaffect the elite, a small part of the population, while entertaining the rest. At the same time, they manage to offer profound cultural reworkings that are as subtle as they are successful in realigning the complicated hegemonic picture of daily life in Latin America.

To carry out their complicated cultural agenda, narco-dramas immerse themselves in a border culture that profoundly reworks discourses of Latin American identity and reacts to living right next door to the most powerful empire in the world today. It is in this symbiotic setting that a new morality or cosmology is created, in which both national boundaries (or neither) are deemed powerful enough to contain the new forms of cultural behavior and social life. Prime among these factors is the central place of violence, physical as well as other forms, in expressing a new way to relate to the world and its surroundings, including those human beings with whom one is forced to interact. This violence is therefore primal, precisely because it serves both as the figurative symbol with which to express the profound vulnerability of life along the border but also because, like all symbols, it is able to express almost infinite numbers of effects and meanings without being easily depleted.

The violence, which is so explicit and central in narco-dramas, responds to both North American and Mexican (and Latin American) forms of aggression that the narco-drama synthesizes to express a survivor mentality that has made this northern region thrive since the 1960s. In many ways, the pivotal place of narco-drama cannot but reflect the primary role of violence in people's lives along the border as a mechanism of daily survival that has been incorporated at so intimate a level that it creates new cultural products in conjunction with or from it. This is not very

surprising considering that border towns, like images of the old West in the United States, and ports have always been thriving but violent places of cultural contact and social imaginary (Genet 1974).

We have seen, since the 1980s, an increase in military surveillance of the border, including the construction of barbed-wire fences and walls, as well as an increase in patrols, all in the hope of keeping immigrants out. Many have noticed this almost paranoid response from the United States, a country that claims to have been built by immigrants, comes at a time when there seems to be a greater migration of people across borders, and the United States and other developed nation-states are looking to increase the flow of goods between transnational spaces. It is almost as if the goods, and not the people, are deemed the only acceptable objects of free trade, which once more emphasizes the essential role of commodities and the commodification of people as an inherent legacy of capitalist expansion.

Intrinsic to this paranoid response from the United States seems to be a complete denial of the same violent and genocidal measures used by the British Empire to rid the land of Native Americans. This denial is also part of the destabilizing claims from any secondary groups, like that of the descendants of enslaved generations of Africans. It is almost as if the United States is precisely scared of allowing other groups to do to it what it did to other world communities. However, if this physical violence would seem to be enough, the greater damage or violence is done through a historical recovery and by the academic intelligentsia, which describes this inhuman destruction with words such as *democracy*, *freedom*, *equality*, and *justice*. This supposed innocence is exactly what can be considered the ultimate form of violence practiced on the social subject, and that, according to James Baldwin (1988), is what cannot be denied or forgiven without unfortunate social consequences.

It is this particular form of violence that succeeds in nourishing one side of narco-drama production. As a border product, narco-dramas have been steeped in the discriminatory and racist undertaking of Latin America's neighbors to the north. In many ways, this powerful white (racially speaking) presence has to be treated with enormous care, since it seems that it will go to any lengths not to admit to itself what it knows at heart to be true: that it has equally unsupported claims to the land from which it is excluding others. The same groups' ancestors were murdered and enslaved to assure the nation-state's socioeconomic and political superiority. Thus, having Texas as a neighbor, for example, is no easy matter, with the state's combined sense of historical amnesia and

rampant gun culture to defend it. The producers of narco-dramas must be very careful to keep the north's naïve view of life intact or pay the price with their lives.

It is this figure of the United States that makes its way into narco-dramas, mainly as the enforcer of drug laws, and that pretends not to be connected with the drug cartels and to be protecting its borders from Mexican and Latin American criminals. But the problem is that neither position derives from respect. The border-protection position, the supposedly honest one, expresses complete historical blindness and thus alignment with historical violence and denial of social reality. The "bad" U.S. cops are at least being logical in the sense that they are not pretending to be something they are not but, rather, are sincerely looking to make a profit from the situation. Like Macbeth's, their position is clear, and migrants to the north know who and what they are dealing with.

Thus U.S. figures affect narco-drama in different and ambivalent manners. On the one hand, narco-dramas are nothing but a Latin version or reaffirmation of the normative representation of the bad U.S. cop. That is, most of the central heroic figures of narco-drama are drug lords and traffickers, as well as illegal immigrants, but the fact is that they are not really criminals from the Third World perspective from which they are being represented and reenacted. The allure, and seductiveness, of these heroes, mostly men, of course, comes from their not pretending to be innocent players but, rather, taking full responsibility for their illegal trade and violent behavior, and the implications of both. It is this honest acceptance of who they are and have always been (because they have been immersed in a history of violence) that has captured everybody's imagination. As inhabitants of the border (geographically and otherwise), audience members can not only relate to these protagonists but can also know them intimately, from the inside out.

The similarities do not end there, however, as the naïve figure is also incorporated for mirroring purposes and offered as another level of seductive psychic integration. If there is anything that is ultimately recoverable from the way in which the empire of the North looks to historically annihilate its enemies it is the appearance of Lone Ranger figures on which it is impossible to place social blame. Even though these heroes are enshrined in positions of power that are the direct result of their home country's criminal behavior, it is that same contradictory innocence that allows them to be seen as somehow above or free of the constraining and constitutive behavior that has explicitly contributed to

making them who they are. Thus it is this contradictory figure who finds himself facing the hero's dilemma in the narco-drama and who is also what allows us to see the hero in a good light, even though he is involved in the drug trade and goes around killing almost everything and everybody in sight.

Therefore, the United States' presence in narco-drama is central, even though it is always (and, for melodramatic reasons, must be) represented by stock figures that fulfill their roles with predictable accuracy to secure the greatest effect. We have a melodramatic genre like narco-drama retrieving decades, if not a century, of imperial policies that have slowly forced it and its *norteco* audience to adapt to a discrete and explicit use of physical and emotional violence to hide its (and the audience's) insecure global moral positioning.

Yet, like all genuine cultural products, narco-dramas have been more than simply reactive. They not only have internalized these global forms of violence and denial of identity but also have utilized these same contrasting images—bad cop and innocent bystander—to turn the tables, so to speak, on the empire.

In carrying out this global melodramatic inversion, however, the narco-drama has developed other implications, including strong national ones that only further enable the genre's cultural potential. It is as if, through these stock characterizations of bad foreigners and local heroes, narco-drama has also been able to escape the official observation of the border from the north. It has done this by portraying the stereotypes that the north expects, all the while ridiculing that same north, which is unaware of its own stereotypes and stock characters. The power of ridicule and irony is no laughing matter, considering the enormous amount of cruelty and pain suffered at the hands of the U.S. Border Patrol and law enforcement. Realizing that one may be smarter and more human than those wielding the power is sometimes the strongest weapon for remaining sane and not losing one's sense of humanity. Staying sane and humane, however, in many cases is not devoid of terror.

The global interaction of narco-drama with North American and other foreign forces is further tempered by the ways in which Mexico's governments have systematically used violence since the beginning of the twentieth century. There are important elements in this regard. First is the patriarchal way in which the state has methodically ignored females' claims to socioeconomic, political, and human equality. At the same time that narco-drama maintains a central patriarchal structure, it manages to relate a "local hero versus giant" plot, which incorporates

many feminist and minority voices that the Mexican state has so successfully annihilated from the cultural picture for its own hegemonic articulation and survival.

The patriarchal structure, in some sense, is the easiest to see and criticize. However, this same structure is also the most subtly problematic because of the intimate manner in which patriarchy is lived and articulated daily in Latin America. This is also why and how narco-drama must be and is embedded in a historical patriarchy that both enables and gives credence to the constant melodramatic representation of what it means to live and survive in the cultural borderlands. For this reason, it is not surprising but, rather, essential for narco-drama to re-create the frustrating and limiting possibilities of women (and men) in daily life and to use that limited viability to represent reality in the most real way through its melodramatic production of it.

Thus narco-dramas are filled with men, all of them at different points on the moral spectrum within the context of the drug trade and immigrant repression. Women in narco-dramas are secondary characters in the sense that they seem destined only to be objects of exchange, in a sort of postmodern interpretation of a Lévi-Straussian or Meillassouxian redistributionary social structure. Men are the ones with public agency to control the flow of goods and commodities, and women are seen as another commodity, but of a sexual nature, to be fought over, won, and handled. But women are also, in many narco-dramas, the reason for the development of the plot and the cause of the demise of one or another heroic (or antiheroic) member of the drug cartels.

As romantic objects of men's public, obsessive desire, women in many cases figure as the most powerful of subjects, leaving behind their stereotyped positioning as objects. Just as in real life, women in the narco-drama wield an enormous amount of power, equal to or even beyond men's, all without having to disrupt their public image as not having such freedom and agency. The power embedded in personal matters and the artificial division of public versus private affairs has been amply discussed and deconstructed by feminist scholars in more than one academic discipline.

As in many of these intellectual scenarios, we can see in the narco-drama very close parallels to the articulation of private/public distinctions. This allows the genre to present a very subtle, yet direct, critique of patriarchal structures by the simple representation of patriarchy in a melodramatic parody. In other words, once the most obvious image of patriarchy is reflected in the narco-drama, its many cracks and incon-

sistencias are obvious and, unlike in other types of social critique or appropriation, there is really little risk of naming them and therefore of suffering the wrath of the emperor being called out for his (and not her) nakedness.

At the same time, this inverted critique of patriarchy steers clear of preaching or disrupting the cultural milieu, a strategy that is not only in keeping with melodramatic structure but that is imperative for the commercial success of most cultural products. Narco-drama, like all successful popular culture objects, must be translatable in direct cultural terms; otherwise, it runs the risk of being irrelevant no matter how truthful or instructive it promises to be. Therefore, what we have is not a call to arms for women's liberation or a scathing critique of men's (and women's) stupidity but, rather, a recognition of the agency and hegemonic articulation which women (alongside men) already wield in the cultural milieu of Mexico's northern frontier.

Because of this preestablished structure of privileged patriarchal representation, disturbing scenarios of female drug cartel leaders, as in *La reina del sur* (see Chap. 8), and ironic rereadings of narco-dramas such as *El mariachi* (see Chap. 9) are able to go beyond being simple intellectual sermons on what is culturally appropriate and to share in the commercial success of the melodrama genre. It is also because of the explicit use of melodramatic inversion of the genre that *La reina del sur* and *El mariachi* are successful in implicitly questioning the inherently stereotypical structure that they are presenting. Just as in narco-drama, and in these two critiques of the genre, the inversion of meaning in the most rational of emotional truths and reality into an absurd image is a delicate matter, and not as easy to do and as lighthearted as the melodramatic approach seems to imply.

In looking at the role of women and of agency in general within the narco-drama, we are also presented with another established melodramatic model: the lone fighter or solitary hero against the overwhelming forces of evil. Of course, the established structure of the (anti)hero as drug trafficker already precludes the idea of a simple good-versus-bad plot; instead, it complicates the story in a more realistic manner. In other words, the antihero as a nonsimplistic, good figure is closer to both the real-life situation of people living in border spaces who have been criminalized (in terms of their space and subjection) and to the border subjects who also must deal with this nonlegal attribution in a realistic manner if they are to survive. As presented in the film *City of God*, a Brazilian version of a Mexican narco-drama, one must shoot and

kill (even if one is a little kid killing another little kid) or accept becoming a victim for life.

The local antihero, in this sense, is not somebody who on the surface or even stereotypically fills the role of the good person (something more in line with the telenovela's melodramatic structure; see previous chapters) but somebody who is good deep down inside, even if that goodness is hidden. Within the completely rotten social context of *norteño* culture, only a total idiot or naïf would pretend to be good, since that could mean lifelong victimization or death and perhaps the death of those you love. The central male character (in most cases) is good and heroic not because he does not kill or because he fights drug trafficking but because he does both in a way that looks to harm the fewest people possible, especially if they do not represent the state (Mexican or otherwise) or other drug cartels.

Thus the state is prefigured in the most complete manner but in a way that is mostly marked by its absence (see Abrams 1988). The antihero gets his status and the compassion of the audience because he looks to do the same things that the (Mexican) state(s) does to its citizens—exploit them, kill them, rob them for its own reproduction—and in doing so gets back at the state to a degree beyond any citizen's possibilities for revenge. It is this many times explicit revenge against the state (and its representatives) that is the most satisfying image in the narco-drama and why redemption often requires multiple deaths, since revenge could occur in no other way. But it is also in this complete commitment, even including death, of the central characters that the *norteño* signature of honesty, machismo, and vulnerability (to life's follies) is suggested as the code for all of life's (criminal) endeavors. It is also in this commitment that killing, raping, and even selling drugs can be redeemed as humane in an inhumane context.

The code of honor inherent in many criminal ventures has already made a dramatic appearance in gangster films such as *The Godfather* and is also a central theme in hip-hop, not only in the United States but throughout the world. Perhaps the rap artist Jay-Z's remarks concerning the incredible dishonesty and backstabbing of the music industry are relevant to our discussion, as these characteristics were absent from his previous life as a drug trafficker. It is this same backstabbing, continuously emphasized in narco-drama, that is most succinctly expressed in *La reina del sur* (Pérez-Reverte 2002a: 428), when a local cop belts out, without offering any help to the drug cartel leader, Teresa Mendoza, as she is being shot at by other drug cartel members, "Órale mi narca,

show ‘em how a Sinoalense girl dies!” (See Chap. 9 for a more detailed discussion of the racial and gender implications of this violent code of honor.)

According to this and other cultural codes, the ultimate bad guy in all narco-dramas appears to be the Mexican state. Because of its legacy of violence, made more violent by a deceptive rhetoric of revolution and liberation, it becomes the poster child for any moral definition of what is bad or acceptable in viable cultural forms. It is also because of the deceptive nature and poor understanding of the Mexican state (and that of all Latin American nation-states) that narco-drama is successful and heralded as a genre of liberation in which a desire to be free of violence and exploitation transcends any actual violence or cruelty. It is not a case of joining the bad guys, the state, in this case, but, rather, of utilizing the same methods to define one’s space and distance from the violent and oppressive state. And this is not an easy or a laughing matter because, as everybody knows, using the master’s trade makes one as evil as the master unless one escapes the connection by not naïvely holding on to one’s innocence or sense of superiority.

Therefore, the veneration of violence in narco-drama, as in other minority cultural genres like hip-hop and rap, because of the rejection of a naïve sense of moral innocence or righteousness, means the complete opposite of its melodramatic portrayal. The discourse of being above the utterly disastrous social conditions of a society being depleted by its own government and left to suffer at the hands of transnational maquiladoras and border patrols is a rhetoric available only for elite and white (in figurative racial terms) people. That is why narco-drama, above all, is not about the white elite but about “true” Mexicans and what being Mexican is all about.

The narco-drama is therefore a story told by *norteños* about *norteño* culture in which gringos and both the Mexican and the U.S. states may limit and condition the contour of the cultural narrative and daily life but not the scope, essence, and agency of those who have the most at stake in daily border life. Thus narco-drama might be violent, but it is infinitely more humane and realistic than any antidrug campaign or judicial process for massacred women in the area have ever been, or most likely will ever be. *Norteños* (like all disempowered Latin American communities) know that as surely as they know the consequences of crossing the imaginary border that separates them from the north and, ultimately, from themselves.