

“The Real Enemy”: Magical Realism and Trauma Consumerism in *Narcos*

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Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, especially following the War on Drugs, more and more artists felt the urgency to tackle the ongoing social and political crisis of drugs in their art. From murals to literature, the effects of drug trafficking from various perspectives were present in works like *Scarface* (1983), Fernando Vallejo's novel *Our Lady of the Assassins* (1994), and the various autobiographies and biographies of drug traffickers and their families. The topic proved not only relevant, but fascinating as well, prompting the creation of various works dealing with the question of trafficking. While some focused on the problems of the United States and its domestic drug epidemic, some looked further, aiming to get to the perceived root of the issue: Latin America. One such work is the popular Netflix series which ran between 2015 and 2017, *Narcos*.

Narcos used a slightly different approach than other similar series, often labelled 'narcomedia' by Latin American studies scholars such as Paul Eiss or Jason Ruiz. The term 'narcomedia' by Eiss' definition is the collection of shorter videos and messages used by cartels to communicate with each other or outsiders, such as the police, using the prefix 'narco' to "evoke the pervasive presence and influence of trafficking or money derived from it" (81)¹. Ruiz expands the term's definition "to refer beyond the modes of communication *within* the world of narcotrafficking to those *about* that demimonde" (2, emphasis in the original). Most narcomedia approach their topics from a documentary-like point of view, while others use them as a backdrop for the story they want to tell. *Narcos* uses both: while it is "inspired by true events" as the disclaimer before every episode states, it presents itself more as a semi-documentary than a mere dramatization of events.

One interesting aspect *Narcos* has that other narcomedia do not is the introduction of the style or genre of magical realism. The pilot episode begins with the uncredited quote "Magical realism is defined as what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe" ("Descenso" 00:00:38), which is later expanded to include, "There is a reason why magical realism was born in Colombia" (00:00:43). The genre is mentioned multiple times throughout the series by the narrator and DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) agent Steve Murphy (Boyd Holbrook), using it to signal that he believes, and assumes the viewer agrees, that the events in the series are too unrealistic to actually have

¹ The prefix 'narco' is used in a similar manner throughout the paper.

happened. However, both his definition and usage of the word is incorrect, raising the question that prompted this paper: why is magical realism a term used in *Narcos*?

The aim of this paper is to highlight the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of Colombia and Latin America in *Narcos* and its related series, *Narcos: Mexico* and *Griselda*, focusing on the concept of ‘trauma economy’ and the misuse of the notion of ‘magical realism’. The incorrect use of the term ‘magical realism’ signals the implausibility of Latin Americans from a United States American point of view specifically in terms of representations of history and explanations of social questions. The series’ usage of the term ‘magical realism’ reduces the effect US foreign policies had on the region and promotes the problematic notion of using the term to incorrectly describe anything Latino or Latin American. The concept of ‘trauma economy’ draws attention to the social and economic effects of narcomedia such as *Narcos* or *Griselda* have on Latin American countries like Colombia. In this paper, I argue that *Narcos* and its related series promote the US American point of view of Latin America, minimizing the devastating consequences of one of the most traumatic periods of Latin American, specifically Colombian history and using it as a source of entertainment for non-Latin American audiences. In the following chapter, after briefly charting the origins and cultural significance of magical realism, I will explore its presence or lack thereof in *Narcos* in order to argue that the series misuses the term and strips it of its political/regional significance. In the ‘Historical background’ chapter, I provide further support for my arguments by highlighting the historical inaccuracy of *Narcos* and providing a brief history of Colombia in order to argue that the events the narrator claims are ‘magical realist’ are simply consequences of multiple historical events. In the ‘Decentering heterosexual men from narcomedia’ chapter, I explore *Griselda* and the ‘girlbossification’ of drug trafficking, as well as Pacho Herrera and queerness in drug trafficking, supporting the argument that the recontextualization of cartels as ‘progressive’ or ‘feminist’ minimizes the severity of their actions. The ‘Trauma consumerism’ chapter focuses on the notion of trauma consumerism, trauma economy, and the promotional materials for the explored series, arguing that such narcomedia do not only promote a biased view of Latin America internationally, but they also profit off of this biased and inaccurate representation.

Magical realism

The quote beginning the pilot episode of *Narcos* immediately ties the genre to the series, however, the definition provided by the series is inaccurate. Magical realism is defined by Wendy B. Faris as works embedding “elements of magic – nonempirically verifiable

phenomena – within a realistic narrative ... [including] the narrative’s presentation of magic with little or no comment” (143). Magical realism is made ‘otherworldly’ by the elements of magic presented as ordinary, not by everyday things deemed “too strange to believe” (00:00:41) by the narrator. The incorrect definition immediately makes a connection between unbelievability and Colombia while acknowledging the heavy Latin American influence on the genre.

Despite the association of Latin America with magical realism, the exact origins of the genre are uncertain. While Latin American writers, like Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges have primarily been named representatives of the genre, it is not, as Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris refer to it, a “Latin American hegemony” (2). The term originates from German art critic Franz Roh, who used it to refer to Post-Expressionism, meaning the term was predominantly used in visual arts rather than literature. While it was not explicitly called ‘magical realism’, similar elements were present in the works of Nikolai Gogol, E.T.A Hoffman, and Franz Kafka from the 19th century, meaning some variation of the genre has been present in European literature even before a term to describe it was coined in 1925 by Roh². What separates Latin American magical realist works from their European counterparts is the anti-colonial undertone present in them.

Following the Latin American Boom of the 1960s and 1970s magical realism became the “literary language of the emergent post-colonial world” (7) as Homi K. Bhabha phrased it. Magical realism was soon present in works of novelists from various continents, like the Japanese Haruki Murakami, the Polish Olga Tokarczuk, or the Indian-born British-American Salman Rushdie. While the genre was becoming increasingly more globalized, its texts continued to “valorize indigenous voices silenced by colonialism, embodying a postcolonial stance and hence performing the cultural work of literary decolonization” (Faris 152). Magical realism served a political purpose—it combined the local indigenous cultures with the predominant culture, a combination which following the globalization of the genre was introduced internationally, “permitting new voices and traditions to be heard within the mainstream” (Faris 101), often criticizing the political and social states of the regions. This inclusion of indigenous cultures and introduction of new voices into the mainstream is why Latin American magical realism is considered to be post- or even anti-colonial by some

² For more information about Franz Roh and Post-Expressionism I recommend the chapter “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism (1925)” of *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris.

scholars, while others criticize the genre for this specific reason. As magical realist works are most frequently written in the colonizers' language, be it English, Spanish, or Portuguese, and include elements of local minority cultures, critics like anthropologist Michael Taussig or Latin American studies scholar Roberto González Echevarría argue that magical realism commodifies Latin American culture as a whole and creates an exoticized, primitive understanding of the region.

The mention of magical realism in *Narcos* serves the exact purpose critics of the genre believe it does: as the series itself features no magical elements, the genre's mention merely attempts to provide an explanation for the unfolding of events in the series while promoting a biased understanding of Colombian history and society. The series spans approximately two decades, from the rise of the Medellín cartel in the mid-1970s to its fall in the mid-1990s. These decades were some of the most violent decades in Colombian history, as the Medellín cartel influenced not only the lives of the locals, but of the entire country with worsening rates of corruption affecting even international politics. DEA agent Steve Murphy narrates from a US American point of view with a very limited understanding of Colombian politics and society—for example, he is either unable or unwilling to understand the complicated relationship the people of Medellín³ have with Pablo Escobar and the Medellín cartel, resorting to using 'magical realism' as a reason why many Medellínenses, despite the violence and instability the Medellín cartel brought to the city, liked and looked up to Escobar.

Episode three of season one, "The Men of Always", focuses on Escobar as he tries to enter Colombian politics and navigate high society. In the 1982 congressional elections, "several known traffickers (from the major drug families) were elected to Congress" (11), according to a 1983 CIA Estimate, one of which was Pablo Escobar. Escobar started focusing more heavily on his philanthropic work, wishing to enter Colombian politics, slowly becoming a public figure and earning the nickname "Robin Hood paisa"⁴. He got elected as an alternate and entered Congress shortly after. His political career, however, was short-lived, as following the Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara-Bonilla's accusations of criminal activity against him, Escobar was publicly expelled from Congress a few months later.

³ In Spanish, a demonym of people from Medellín is Medellínense. This phrase is used throughout the paper.

⁴ As mentioned in the episodes two and three of season one ("The Sword of Simón Bolívar" and "The Men of Always"), Escobar spent a lot of money creating Barrio Pablo Escobar, a neighborhood in one of the poor areas of Medellín. Even before he decided to pursue a career in politics, Escobar was involved in philanthropic work in the poor neighborhoods of Medellín, building football fields and handing out money. For more information about his philanthropic work, I recommend *Kings of Cocaine* (1989) by journalists Guy Gugliotta and Jeff Leen.

Steve⁵ justifies the confidence of Pablo by saying “There’s a reason magical realism was born in Colombia. It’s a country where dreams and reality are conflated where, in their heads, people fly as high as Icarus” (“The Men of Always” 00:34:14). The narration subtly ridicules the people of Colombia by implying that they are unable to have expectations and goals Steve considers rational; instead of turning to social or cultural differences that could explain the phenomenon Steve observes, he evokes the genre of magical realism, claiming that it could only come from a country as ‘surreal’ as Colombia, a notion he reinforces throughout the seasons with his narrations. The series lacks the combination of local minority cultures with the mainstream that characterizes Latin American magical realism, as it is told primarily through a United States perspective. The series takes an effort to criticize the political and social situation in Colombia, however, the criticism comes from an outsider, non-Colombian perspective, which perspective is without the necessary understanding of ‘Colombianidad’⁶ to be able to accurately pinpoint issues with the country’s contemporary society rather than simply condemning Colombians’ supposed ‘inability’ to govern their country.

Magical realism in *Narcos* is present not as a legitimate descriptor but as ‘something vaguely Latin American’ which fits in well with the pan-Latino mix the series creates: from the creators to the actors, the majority of the people working on *Narcos* are not Colombians or of Colombian descent, rather from all over the Americas. The aim of the series was not simply to tell the story of Colombian trafficking but also to sell a version of Colombia that never really existed, an alternate reality where the people of a country are so ‘primitive’, drawing from Echevarría’s criticism, that they are unable to solve their own problems and require US interference. Evoking ‘magical realism’ does not only simplify complicated historical events and their consequences, but creates an incorrect and harmful view of Colombia and Colombians that supports negative stereotypes against not only them, but Latin Americans in general.

Historical background

The events Steve claims to be ‘magical realist’ are nothing more than consequences of historical and social events: the aim of this chapter is to provide a brief historical background to *Narcos* to support this paper’s claims that the events of the series are consequences of historical events rather than magical realism. When discussing the topic of

⁵ Throughout the paper, I refer to the on-screen characters by their first names and the real-life people by their last names in order to make the differentiation between the two easier.

⁶ ‘Colombianidad’ could be roughly translated as ‘Colombianness’, referring to the identity of being Colombian regardless of ethnic, racial, or social background, used as an umbrella term.

Latin American history, two foreign nations must be mentioned: one of them is the Spanish Empire, which colonized the region and maintained control over it until around the mid-1820s, by which time majority of countries have gained their independence. In 1821, the army led by Simón Bolívar ended the Spanish rule of Colombia and introduced a new foreign nation to Latin America, the United States (Bushnell).

The United States in Latin America was concerned more so with its future influence and power over the region rather than helping these new countries maintain their independence, which is further shown by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. While at the time the United States was not yet the powerful nation it would be even just a century later, with the doctrine, the intention of becoming a hegemonic power was already expressed (Millett). By the late 19th century, the US was on an upward track both economically and in terms of global power. The creation of an interoceanic canal had been the goal of the United States for decades, and by the 1890s, the country had the resources and the advantages to negotiate one. The US wished to construct a canal through Panama, a territory of Colombia at the time, however, the treaty proposed by the US was rejected by Colombian Congress (Crandall). Coincidentally, Panama has been trying to secede from Colombia for decades—US intervention helped Panama declare its independence, who in turn supported the creation of the Panama Canal, causing US-Colombian relations to sour.

Cold War era relations

It took decades for their relations to improve. Following World War II, entering the Cold War meant that the US needed to forget its Good Neighbor policy and intervene in Latin American affairs, as it was determined to “make Washington's influence paramount” (Millett 121). As “much of U.S. policy toward the region has been guided by a long historical view of its hemispheric neighbors as a partner against potential threat by outside power” (Sabatini 3), it is not surprising that the United States considered Latin America its natural ally in whatever war they were fighting. Combined with the “rigid view ... that communism was the root of all evil in Latin America” (Crandall 23), these ideas encouraged the United States to treat Latin America as another ‘battleground’ in the Cold War. In this fight, the US found an ally in Colombia, with its leaders sharing the fears of the US, and the country being relatively ‘communist-free’.⁷ Colombia became one of the biggest recipients of US military aid, the US

⁷ Communism in Colombia consisted of small, disorganized groups for decades. This only changed around the 1960s, following La Violencia, a ten-year civil war between Colombia’s conservative and liberal parties. Organized groups like FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo, translated as

government established army, navy, and air force attaché offices in the nation's capital Bogotá, and Colombia even received a military training team to help train the country's military as communist guerilla groups gained followers.

By the 1970s, fighting communism lost its importance as a new enemy emerged: drug trafficking. President Richard Nixon declared drugs “public enemy number one” in 1971, although at the time the resources to fight were focused domestically and on Mexico. In Nixon's speech, he mentions a variety of drugs but excludes cocaine—in the 1970s, cocaine was not yet considered to be a major contributor to drug addiction. Instead, the drugs Nixon feared were marijuana and heroin: marijuana was the drug of choice of students, young people, and the anti-war population, while heroin was the “the scapegoat for the ‘black’ crime wave sweeping decayed U.S. cities” (Gootenberg 165), as well as what was believed to be the drug of choice of returning Vietnam veterans.

In episode one of season one “Descenso”, Steve points out the threat of “cocaine in Miami” (00:53:58) as the reason why he decided to move to Colombia with his wife. Beyond that, the series neglects the implications of the War on Drugs on American society, focusing on politics. However, the presence of cocaine in the United States caused many issues which should be mentioned when talking about the historical background of the series, as many of the domestic problems in the 1980s were caused by the Medellín and Cali cartels. While the US American history of cocaine is long, it could be divided into two epidemics, following historian David T. Courtwright's division. The first cocaine epidemic lasted between the mid-1800s until the 1920s, when the drug was mainly used in surgery as an anaesthetic, later promoted in various medical journals as a sort of cure-all. This “excessive enthusiasm of cocaine's medical proponents” (216) caused the number of cocaine addicts to rise in the early 20th century, quickly causing the drug's loss of popularity. Following the 1920s, public attention shifted from cocaine to heroin until around the late 1960s-early 1970s.

The second cocaine epidemic had, as Courtwright pointed out, “three stages: a sustained increase in cocaine use, mostly sniffing from an initially low level in 1969 through the early 1980s; the explosive growth of crack smoking in the mid-1980s; and a decline after 1988 among younger, casual and affluent users, though not among those already addicted” (224). By the mid-1970s, cocaine was everywhere, used by celebrities, present in both conventional and

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army), the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), or the M-19 (Movimiento 19 de Abril, translated as the 19th of April Movement) emerged and started becoming politically active shortly after the end of the civil war.

counter-cultural media, with the majority public perceiving the drug as non-addictive and classy, as most users at the time were wealthy white people who fit the era's beauty standards. By the 1980s, the key goal of traffickers like the Medellín and Cali cartel was the development and popularization of crack, a cheap and ready to use freebase which widened the market for cocaine.

Cheaper cocaine that did not require injections meant the drug was now available to lower classes, as well as more women. This meant that following the popularization of crack, cocaine suddenly became a non-white (specifically Black and Latino) and poor problem, which worsened the domestic front of the war on drugs and started an era known as the 'crack epidemic'⁸.

Colombia in the 1980s

The 1980s in Colombia were defined by cartels, paramilitary groups, and guerillas⁹. Medellín was technically at war, as the city was "a microcosm of many violences" (113), as philosophy scholar Ramiro Ceballos Melguizo and historian Francine Cronshaw referred to it. The Medellín cartel was the most significant cause of 'violence' in the city, taking advantage of the high levels of unemployment and the desperation of the inhabitants of the city's less developed areas. As the decade progressed, cartels and paramilitary groups (like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, commonly referred to as FARC) started working together, combining techniques and tactics, merging the different 'violences'.

One such alleged collaboration is featured in *Narcos*: the 1985 Palace of Justice siege. In episode four of season one "The Palace in Flames", the newly signed extradition treaty meant that, as Steve said, "now Pablo had someone to fear: us" (00:02:18), referring to both the DEA and the United States. The series draws from a popular conspiracy theory which claims that the Palace of Justice siege was a result of the collaboration of the Medellín cartel and the M-19 guerilla group, with the series framing the siege as a response to the extradition treaty and a sign of fear. In reality, as historian Lina Britto pointed out, the siege was a "deeply political operation designed as a symbolic trial of President Belisario Betancur for reneging on the August 1984 peace accords between the government, the M-19, and the Popular Liberation

⁸ The domestic implications of the war on drugs fall outside the scope of this paper, however, they are important to keep in mind when discussing the effects of and approaches taken by narcomedia like *Narcos*. For further reading, I recommend "The Severely-Distressed African American Family in the Crack Era: Empowerment is not Enough", a paper published by sociologists Eloise Dunlap, Andrew Golub, and Bruce D Johnson in 2006.

⁹ It is important to differentiate between left-wing guerillas (like FARC or M-19) and right-wing paramilitary groups (for example the organization formed by the Medellín cartel, the Colombian military, and the US-based Texas Petroleum, Muerte a Secuestradores, or MAS, meaning Death to Kidnappers).

Army (EPL)” (177), and the involvement of the Medellín cartel is unclear. The series, however, treats the theory of cooperation between the cartel and the guerillas as a fact when it was not.

Nevertheless, actual cooperation between cartels and paramilitary groups was highlighted by many Central Intelligence Agency documents. In a 1982 document detailing US policy towards Colombia, the first major US interest is still the upkeep of “the GOC’s (Government of Colombia) active support for US foreign policy” (001) and the defense of Colombia’s “political system against violent overthrow by Marxist extremists” (001). The “curtailment of the production of illicit narcotics and their export” (001) was only the second major US interest at the time. Many documents draw attention to the cooperation between these two ‘violences’, acknowledging the mutual help that aids both drug trafficking and guerilla/paramilitary activities: these paramilitary groups and guerillas often taxed cartels operating on their territories to finance themselves. These two questions continued to be major US interests, but not necessarily Colombian interests.

The Colombian government focused on the worsening economy of the country, on internal security problems (which did include paramilitary groups, guerillas, and cartels to an extent), and on the general politics of the region instead of prioritizing American interests. Not only Medellín, but the entirety of Colombia was also technically at war—the Colombian conflict united these different ‘violences’, all sides striving for something different. Guerilla groups were using violence to protect the poor and disadvantaged with paramilitary groups as reactionaries, the Colombian government fought to restore the status quo, and cartels prioritized the expansion of their influence. These powers defined the 1980s not only in Colombian society, but also in terms of foreign relations, as even the United States actively took part in the conflict.

Following the 1980s, as the series comes to an end, the key events of the early 1990s were the death of Escobar in 1993, and the fall of the Cali cartel in 1995. Both events are present in *Narcos*, shown through the lens of the DEA agents, which lens exaggerates the importance of the DEA and the United States. Following Pablo’s death scene (season two episode ten “Al Fin Cayó!”, for example, a photo (00:44:13) featuring Escobar’s dead body, Search Bloc members, and agent Steve Murphy is shown—a photo featuring the DEA agent was chosen deliberately, to signal the importance of the DEA in Escobar’s capture. *Pablo Escobar, el patrón del mal* (2012), a Colombian biographical series about the life of Escobar features a similar photo taken (Murphy), however, no DEA agents are featured. The death scene of Escobar was also filmed without DEA presence.

The series continuously frames events to support the US-centric view and preexisting ideas about Colombia: the explanations of these distorted and misrepresented moments of Colombian history, provided by agent Murphy, might seem rational and logical to the viewers as they (as presumed by the narrator) also lack proper historical background knowledge. Steve's use of 'magical realism', of arguing that a country and its people are incapable of helping themselves is easily accepted by an audience that does not know Colombian history and believes that the documentary-like approach taken by *Narcos* means unbiased historical accuracy.

Decentering the heterosexual male in narcomedia

Historical accuracy would mean that women are present in narcomedia in ways other than wives and lovers. Narcomedia most frequently focus on men: both *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico*, or classics of the genre like *Scarface* feature male traffickers and law enforcement, reducing the female characters to damsels in distress or trophies for the traffickers. Stories about female traffickers are uncommon, but not nonexistent—the 2002 Arturo Pérez-Reverte novel *La Reina del Sur*, its 2011 television adaptation, and its English-language remake *Queen of the South* (2016-2021) focus on female traffickers. The objective of this chapter is to explore narratives which decenter heterosexual men. The aim of this section is to explore the history of women's presence in drug trafficking and their on-screen representations to argue that the approach taken by *Griselda* (2024) 'girlbossifies' drug trafficking and the violence inflicted by the real-life Griselda Blanco. Following this section of the chapter I explore the presence of queer drug traffickers in *Narcos* through Cali cartel leader Pacho Herrera in order to argue that the series presents an interpretation of Herrera which is not only inaccurate but makes space for an understanding of the Cali cartel which minimizes the severity of their actions.

As sociologists Jennifer Fleetwood and Lindsay Leban, as well as political studies scholar Serena Simoni pointed out, while women's deviance and presence in organized crime has historically been undertheorized and neglected, women have always been part of the drug trade. For a long time, women's presence in drug trafficking was understood as a result of coercion from men or a lack of choice, however, with the rise of crack cocaine, as mentioned in the previous chapter, more opportunities opened for women. As criminologist Jeffrey Fagan highlighted, the increasingly stable cocaine economy helped women "escape their limited roles, statuses and incomes" (210), providing "an outlet for women to achieve conventional goals for family through illegal work" (210), and an alternative to prostitution or street vending. Women

turning towards drug trafficking as a more stable and less dehumanizing way of making a living calls attention to the systemic issues within Latin America, and ‘joining the workforce’ in this sense should not be understood as an empowering choice made by these women.

Social implications of women in drug trafficking

Women’s presence in narcotrafficking, much like any other sphere, has social implications—women are not simply workers, they represent and challenge certain ideas in both US American and Latin American society. As historian Elaine Carey wrote, women related to drugs in any way were seen as a threat to society: as addicts, they “neglected their duties as mothers and wives to acculturate children and maintain a stable home” (7); as dealers, they challenged the view “that women were ‘unfit’ to hold positions in the upper hierarchies of the drug economy, just as they were considered “unfit” to play a role in the upper levels of the formal economy” (7). Women in trafficking, like Teresa Mendoza, the protagonist of Pérez-Reverte’s *La Reina del Sur*, “[destabilize] the sexist norms of the drug underworld and [prove] that women can be a match for the men even in those areas that have long been considered exclusively in the masculine domain” (Pobutsky 273). As journalist Deborah Bonello wrote, “the mother factor in the drug trade is perhaps the most uncomfortable truth of all, because it violates one of our most basic beliefs: that mothers are supposed to be [...] kind and nurturing” (51): whether addicts or traffickers, mothers are not culturally accepted to place anything above their children, which these women are often considered to do.

While female addicts are considered threats to society, it is female traffickers who, in a Latin American context, truly challenge machismo and Latin American perceptions of masculinity—female traffickers are aggressors, “social disruptors who can attain a mythic status but cannot remain long within the established social hierarchies, be they legal or criminal” (Pobutsky 282), because a “woman as ruthless as a man is an enigma” (282). The social expectations of women are in contrast with the very existence of female traffickers, as the violence through which they achieve their goals and enter the sphere of trafficking is perceived to be as masculine as the world of narcotrafficking itself. These women redefine the gendered structures of both the narco world and general society, succeeding in an environment built by and for men in which their roles are stereotypically limited.

Women in trafficking on screen and *Griselda*

As women’s presence in trafficking is established, it is important to examine how they are presented on screen. Because most narcomedia often feature women “as secondary characters who reinforce popular notions of women as mules or as lovers of prominent drug

lords” (Carey 2), it is important to show women as perpetrators of violence as well (Simoni), debunking the myth that women are only victims of narco trafficking and not active participants in the violence related to trafficking. Latin American and Latina women are still confined by stereotypes when it comes to media as most works reduce these women to one-sided characters, presenting them as an ‘exotic other’, objectifying and dehumanizing them. This one-sidedness reduces these women to either ‘holy virgins’ who are disgusted and appalled by violence and crimes, or ‘violent whores’ who perpetuate and enjoy violence. However, as mentioned above, women’s relationship to drugs and violence was and is still seen as a threat to multiple male-dominated fields, therefore their representations on screen are often inaccurate, changed and shifted to fit certain stereotypes and preconceptions.

These changes are visible in narcomedia about Griselda Blanco, the “Godmother” of cocaine in Miami, an important figure in the cocaine boom of the 1980s.¹⁰ In Billy Corben’s 2006 documentary, *Cocaine Cowboys*, and its 2008 sequel *Hustlin’ with the Godmother*, Blanco is presented as masculine and slender, contrasting her real-life figure, as she was a chubby, middle-aged woman. The 2024 Netflix mini series *Griselda* does the opposite as *Cocaine Cowboys*, but still misrepresents Blanco: the Andrés Baiz directed biographical crime drama cast Sofia Vergara as Blanco, who provided an elegant, slim, feminine interpretation of the drug queenpin. The different representations of Blanco all serve different purposes—with a more masculine look, that space between the seemingly surreal idea of the ‘female trafficker’ and the middle-aged mother is bridged, assigning the masculinity necessary for the audience to accept Blanco as more than eye-candy: a legitimate threat. A more feminine representation, like Vergara’s, also draws from the unbelievability of a queenpin, but takes a different approach to make Blanco more tolerable to a wider audience by making her conventionally attractive. Although Vergara’s features are partially hidden behind layers of prosthetic makeup, a slender, elegant queenpin only threatens the patriarchal system of trafficking, not the Latin American standards for women.

The aspect where *Griselda* differs from other female trafficker-focused narcomedia is the strong emphasis on the ‘girls can do anything’-‘girlboss’ notions of the 2010s, a term that emerged with fourth-wave feminism. I define the term ‘girlboss feminism’ as a very specific branch of feminism which focuses on women’s ability and right to enjoy capitalism as businesswomen or entrepreneurs, neglecting intersectional issues such as racism or

¹⁰ For more information about Blanco, I recommend chapter five (Women Who Made It Snow) of Elaine Carey’s *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime* (2014).

homophobia and their effects.¹¹ ‘Girlbossism’ heavily relies on the upkeep capitalism—its end goal is not the creation of a fair and equal system that would ensure the liberation of marginalized groups, rather the individual success of specific women. Their issue with capitalism (or in the case of drug trafficking, with the trafficking world) is not the exploitation, but that the person profiting is not a woman. The principle through which the series is structured is influenced by this ‘girlbossism’ which structure is supported by the presence and significance of June Hawkins (played by Juliana Aidén Martínez), the police officer tasked with bringing down Griselda. Hawkins’ and Griselda’s struggles as both mothers and ‘professionals’ are often contrasted in the series, shown as parallels, mirroring each other. They are used as role models to show that maintaining a successful career as a mother is possible.

Throughout the six episodes of the mini series, Griselda’s success is celebrated as a triumph for women: she is shown living up to her nickname of “Godmother”, helping and supporting her employees both financially and often mentally, and she is presented as a ‘more refined’ alternative to male traffickers in the area. A moment highlighting this in the series is the speech she gives to a group of Marielitos¹² in episode 4 “Middle Management”:

We both have the same problem. Every room I walk into, I’m just a woman. Every room you walk into, you’re just a Marielito. When people look at you, they only see your tattoos and that you don’t speak English. They think, “How can I use them?”, “How can I abuse them”? The only way to get what we want is by taking it. And to do that, we need strength. Strength in numbers and strength here [points to chest]. I don’t have to tell you what I’ll do for your families. You’ve seen it. I don’t have to tell you I’ll fight for you, you’ve seen it. What you need to know is, if you work for me, you’ll have a purpose, and you’ll have respect. When we’re done with this shit, you won’t be washing their fucking dishes. You’ll be sitting at their table, eating their lobster, driving their Caddies, and swimming in their fucking pools. So who wants a piece of that? (00:25:29-00:27:10)

The monologue draws a parallel between the experiences of women and Marielitos as oppressed members of society who have to work harder in order to succeed. Other than being a

¹¹ The term has previously been used in articles like “The Girlboss Has Left the Building” (Amanda Mull, *The Atlantic*, 2020), “Feminism Is Political Again. What’s A Girlboss To Do?” (Jessica Testa, *Buzzfeed News*, 2017), “What the fall of the ‘girlboss’ reveals” (Marie Solis, *CNN*, 2020), or “Smashing the girlboss myths: how women are doing ambition on their own terms” (Emma Beddington, *The Guardian*, 2024).

¹² The term ‘Marielito’ refers to the Cuban immigrants who arrived in the United States via the Mariel boatlift in 1980.

motivational speech to join her organization, the monologue continues to support the main idea and reason behind the show's creation: women have it harder and are often underestimated, especially women in drug trafficking. But what the monologue also does is show the caring, maternal, 'godmotherly' side of Griselda which was her most emphasized trait in the series.

As previously established, women who are involved with drugs are threats to society (Carey), especially if they are mothers (Bonello). In *Griselda*, we see Griselda as both often needlessly violent, murdering people for no reason, and caring towards her children and employees. Episode 5 "Paradise Lost" is dedicated to show Griselda's loss of control over both her empire and her family, as the two seemingly happen simultaneously, influencing each other. The episode centers an extravagant birthday party for Griselda's husband, Darío, partially intended to show off the wealth and power of her empire and to serve as the event that highlights her loosening grip on her operations and her children. Her identity as a mother is brought up multiple times throughout the episode and throughout the series, on the one hand as a basis of criticism, as she is considered to be a bad mother by multiple characters, on the other, as a weakness. Near the end of the episode, Griselda finds her husband and one of her employees talking privately, which causes her (heavily under the influence of multiple substances) to try and shoot both of them. Disappointed and mad, Darío shares that the topic of their conversation was "how [Griselda is] a terrible fucking mother" (00:35:53) who "ruined [her] boys" (00:36:04). This later prompts Darío to move to Colombia with their son, Michael Corleone, leaving Griselda and her other children behind.

In the finale of the series "Adios, Miami", as officer Judy Hawkins and her partner are struggling to find Griselda's 'second-in-command' following her arrest, Judy voices that Griselda is "still a mother" (00:25:51), meaning that she would only leave her children with someone she trusts, which realization eventually helps them find Griselda's 'second-in-command' and trying Griselda with more serious charges. Her character is tied to stereotypes which plague the on-screen presence of Latin American women and Latinas in American media: the 'mother', the 'whore', the 'badass strong woman' are phrases which are used frequently in the series to refer to Griselda to really stress the 'girlboss' mentality supported by the series. Emphasizing Griselda as a mother following senseless violence inflicted by her without remorse throughout the series, as well as this specific episode, plays on the idea voiced by Bonello as well, that mothers should be nurturing and they should take care of their children, not violent. Griselda does both, taking what she believes is rightfully hers through violence and taking care of the sex workers she used as human mules.

Through the six episodes of *Griselda*, the viewers are introduced to an important figure in drug trafficking through a ‘girlbossified’ lens, with the series having a clear objective to accomplish—frame the story of Griselda Blanco as a story of an underdog, someone who succeeded against all odds. She is shown as a mother, caring not only for her family, but her subordinates, as well: scenes of glamour contrasted against bloody corpses remind the viewer that this ‘girlboss’ is suspected to be involved in 200 murders, as promotional material for the series proudly states. The violence inflicted by her is framed as a necessity to found and maintain her empire with little attention paid to the lives she destroyed and the overall consequences of not only the violence, but the mere operations of Blanco.

Queerness¹³ in trafficking

What receives little attention in *Griselda* despite being a relatively widely accepted fact is her bisexuality. In episode 5 “Paradise Lost”, her queerness is simply alluded to as one of the characters brings a female sex worker to Griselda at a party where they seemingly engage in some sort of sexual act. Blanco’s queerness, while not confirmed, is something many of her contemporaries pointed out with director Guillermo Navarro presenting it as a fact in his 2017 biographical crime drama about the queenpin, *Cocaine Godmother*. As the series centered Griselda as a mother, it is understandable that the creators would neglect the question of her sexuality, although regretfully, as there are not many narratives featuring queer drug traffickers. The storyline of Pacho Herrera in season 3 of *Narcos* is one such narrative.

Following the death of Pablo, *Narcos* switched its focus from the now insignificant Medellín cartel to the Cali cartel and the ‘Gentlemen of Cali’, of which Pacho Herrera was one. His sexuality, much like Blanco’s, is uncertain: the trafficking world was just as homophobic and machista as the ‘outside’ world, therefore solid evidence besides the stories of their contemporaries is rather hard to find. Despite this, in *Narcos*, Pacho is an openly gay character whose actions and motives are influenced by his queerness. In this section of the chapter, I will explore the topic of queerness in drug trafficking through the historical figure of Pacho Herrera and the character in *Narcos* in order to argue that his on-screen representation and the choices made by the show’s creators present the idea of a ‘gay narco’ and an open cartel as an advancement towards equality rather than conclusions drawn from an unconfirmed theory about a drug trafficker in charge of one of the biggest cartels of history.

¹³ Throughout the chapter, ‘queerness’ and ‘queer’ is used as an umbrella term for all LGBTQ+ identities. As the sexualities of the real-life figures are not confirmed, there is not one specific term to use in this chapter.

While queer people in organized crime are not a common phenomenon, they have been present in organized crime for a long time; their presence there depends heavily on the organizations they join¹⁴. Criminologist Vanessa R. Panfil in her study about the queer gang members of Columbus, Ohio, came across a member who shared that “gay gang members’ acceptance in gangs could very well differ by which gangs their sets were affiliated with” (73), as some gangs would never accept a queer member while others took a more lenient approach to the question. Unfortunately, research on these men is sparse: most focus on domestic violence within gay relationships, gay men’s presence in sex work or hate crimes, leaving the presence of queer men in crime and organized crime unexplored. Gay men’s stereotypical understanding as “passive, effeminate, middle-class, and white” (Panfil 103) is in contrast with the violent nature of crime, therefore causing the removal of gay men as possible members of organized crime.

Texts about the Cali cartel often exclude the question of Herrera’s sexuality and works that do include it frequently treat it as a sidenote rather than an important part of the drug lord’s identity. In investigative journalist William C. Rempel’s 2011 book *At the Devil’s Table: The Untold Story of the Insider Who Brought Down the Cali Cartel*, Herrera is described in a straightforward manner as a “homosexual” (10), emphasizing that he looked “as if he had just stepped off the pages of a gentleman’s fashion magazine” (10). A similar sentiment is highlighted in journalist Ron Chepesiuk’s *The Bullet or the Bribe: Taking Down Colombia’s Cali Drug Cartel* (2003), where DEA agent Dave Mitchell is quoted to describe Herrera by saying that “he looked as if he had just left a GQ fashion show” (233). Chepesiuk quotes another DEA agent who shared that based on accounts they heard, Herrera’s sexuality was “tolerated” (10) within the cartel, and “Pacho would go off and do his thing and business was business” (10). In both works, Herrera’s sexuality is secondary to the overall story of the Cali cartel—both writers treat it as an unimportant fact.

In season three of *Narcos*, however, Pacho’s sexuality is not a secondary part of his identity, it is presented as an important motivator for his choices and decisions throughout the season. In a conversation with a trafficker from Mexico, Pacho shares his slim backstory:

My turn to tell you a story, Amado. About the time when my father found me in my room with another boy. ... My father told me that I wasn’t a man, that I would never be

¹⁴ For example, American mobster John “Johnny Boy” D’Amato was murdered by members of his mob in 1992 for being gay (Guardian).

one. It was the last time he spoke to me. ... For a long time I thought he was right. Even after I started working for Gilberto and Miguel. Up until the day some motherfucker told them I was a faggot. And that it was a mistake to let me be part of the business. You know what they did? They made me a partner. Gilberto, Miguel, and Chepe, they are my family. I can't just leave them when they need me the most. (Season three, episode five "MRO" 00:44:31-00:45:22)

His backstory features a trope common in queer media and in queer characters' backstories: found or chosen families are present in series like *Pose* (2018-2021) or *Sense8* (2015-2018), where queer characters disowned or otherwise removed from their families find support from people they are not biologically related to. Pacho describes the same, as for him, the 'Gentlemen of Cali' fulfill the role of found family: he refuses to betray them. This backstory provides a new angle to cartels through which they could be understood as legitimate support systems for those involved, although I find this angle rather ironic. The series' (re)framing of cartels as support systems is an interesting approach to take when both the narration (provided in season three by DEA agent Javier Peña, former partner of the previous narrator, played by Pedro Pascal) and the chain of events themselves emphasize the cruelty of the Cali cartel and Pacho specifically. Trying to present the "biggest cocaine cartel in history" (season three episode one "The Kingpin Strategy" 00:09:44) as a 'chosen family' is essentially 'pinkwashing' or 'rainbow-washing',¹⁵ the Cali cartel, framing the violence and intimidation done by the 'gentleman' as somehow progressive because a queer narco is responsible for it. Although crime organizations sometimes function as found families (Panfil), equating a support system to one of the most violent drug cartels of history makes it harder to accurately judge and criticize the cartel as it becomes more personal and subjective: it is no longer a cartel that is being criticized, but a community which saved a person's life.

Pacho's character was one of the first queer characters on Netflix and one of the few queer narcotraffickers on screen. While "ample evidence suggests" (Ruiz 106) his queerness, it is not confirmed. Despite this, the series treats it as a fact, using it to present trafficking as a more open, accepting community than contemporary Colombia without actually tackling the issues of homophobia and machismo culture in the country. Without background knowledge, an understanding of the relationship of queerness and Colombianidad, viewers watching season three might easily conclude that cartels provided a 'safe place' for members of the community,

¹⁵ 'Pinkwashing' and 'rainbow-washing' both refer to the marketing practice of framing something as supportive of the LGBTQ+ community when in reality it is not supportive or inclusive.

when that was not the case. Tackling the issue of Herrera's sexuality is important and appropriate for a series aiming for historical accuracy, however, the presentation of the Cali cartel as an accepting and open organization directly contradicts the aim of season three, which is to highlight the cruelty of the cartel.

Trauma consumerism

While Escobar died in 1993, and with him the Medellín cartel, their presence in both Medellín and the public consciousness remains, causing what sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander refers to as “collective trauma” (1). Because of the narcoviolence and the political tension domestically and internationally, Colombians, and specifically Medellínenses have needed a method to cope with the cultural traumas of the 1980s. A possible coping mechanism was identified by media studies scholar Marita Sturken as “the complex relationship of mourning and consumerism” (4). Sturken goes on to say that “tourists *visit* sites where they do not live, they are outsiders to the daily practices of life in tourist destinations, ... they are often defined as innocent outsiders, mere observers whose actions are believed to have no effect on what they see” (10, emphasis in the original). Through this phenomenon locals transform into tourists, into outsiders who have no obligations to understand the historical backgrounds or cultural implications of their places of residence, or in a broader sense, the culture they are living in. The tourist position grants them the outsider perspective necessary to remove themselves from their own traumas and experience them from an objective, outside perspective, which helps them with tackling and learning to live with their traumas. They are no longer required to always be in mourning—they can try and move on.

Colombia's economy is dependent on tourism: based on the latest available report, in 2016 tourism contributed 2% to the country's GDP and 2.5% of available jobs in the country (Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report by the World Economic Forum, 130), with the largest number of tourists for three consecutive years coming from the United States (Colombia's Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, 16). While Colombia has many UNESCO World Heritage sites, national parks, and its constantly improving capital city, Bogotá, a number of tourists arriving to Medellín are more interested in dark tourism, which could be defined as “presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley and Lennon 98). In Medellín, Escobar tours and pilgrimages are very popular among tourists who want to live the drug lord lifestyle themselves. These tours glorify Escobar and offer trips to his former estates, his grave, where he died, and all other notable narcolocations in the city, as well as merchandise to take home. Some of these tours are run by

his family members, meaning that many people related to Escobar still make a living off of him and his memory. The tours, advertised to foreigners on sites like GetYourGuide, Civitatis, Viator, or Tripadvisor, all offer the “ultimate private Pablo Escobar tour with a local expert” (viator.com) for 40-90 USD¹⁶ per person: where the money goes, who actually profits off of these tours, is never exactly clarified as the exact organizers behind these tours, be they individuals or companies are not clearly named.

Other than dark tourism, another popular reason for visiting Colombia includes sex tourism (“travel to engage in sex for money”, Hannum 1), a growing industry in Latin America. As a taxi driver reported in Goyes and Franko’s paper, most tourists they meet “obviously ask about drug trafficking, about where they can buy sex, buy drugs, where the clubs and the ladies are” (10). Many Americans go to Colombia to live the fantasy narcomedia like *Narcos* popularized, which fantasy draws on and relies on stereotypes about Latinos and Latin Americans, specifically women. While prostitution¹⁷ is legal in Colombia, due to human trafficking, poverty, or sexual enslavement (2008 Human Rights Reports), women, and often children, are not in brothels by choice. The widespread prostitution and the cheaper cost of living allows American tourists to experience the fantasy narcomedia sold them by further engaging in the fetishization of Latinas and Latin American women.

Consequently, trauma is marketable and profitable not only for those who have no lived experience of it, but also for those who have suffered through the pain they are profiting off of. Possible examples of a group commercializing their own suffering include the acquaintances and family members of Escobar who have written countless memoirs, such as *Mi vida y mi cárcel con Pablo Escobar* (2018), written by Escobar’s widow, Victoria Eugenia Henao, or *Pablo Escobar: My Father* (2014), written by Juan Pablo Escobar, Escobar’s son, or *My Mother, The Godmother: The True Story of Michael Corleone Blanco, the Son of Griselda Blanco* (2024), written by Griselda Blanco’s son, Michael Corleone Blanco.

Trauma economy

As trauma becomes both marketable and profitable, it is often turned into a commodity, as seen with both *Narcos* or *Griselda*, for example. Terri Tomsy raises the concept of “trauma economy” (53) (“From Sarajevo to 9/11: Travelling Memory and the Trauma Economy”),

¹⁶ For comparison, the monthly minimum wage in Colombia in 2024 was 1.3 million Colombian pesos, approximately 300 USD.

¹⁷ As opposed to ‘sex work’, in this essay the term ‘prostitution’ is used because of its association with sexual exploitation and coercion, whereas ‘sex work’ could be provided voluntarily and consensually.

which she defines as “economic, cultural, discursive and political structures that guide, enable and ultimately institutionalize the representation, travel and attention to certain traumas” (53). In the case of the narcoviolence suffered by Colombians and Medellínenses those that either lived the violence or experience the consequences of it are most often not the ones profiting from their own traumas. While some of the actors and crew of *Narcos* are from Mexico or South America, the overwhelming majority are not of Colombian descent. Not even the Primetime Emmy Award nominated Cuban bolero “Tuyo,” sang by Brazilian singer Rodrigo Amarante, which served as the series’ title song, has any ties to Colombia. The people most heavily involved in the creation of the series do not share the cultural trauma Colombians and Medellínenses do, therefore the creation of a narcoseries like *Narcos* could not be understood as a coping mechanism, but as a form of “trauma consumerism” (Goyes and Franko 4) where both the consumers and the suppliers are outsiders to the culture whose traumas they consume, recreate, and profit from. Trauma consumerism is just as important to trauma economies as regular consumerism is to regular economies—while all stories are worth telling, only the points of view that are deemed jaw-dropping are able to draw in crowds and profit. These stories, like the story of Escobar or the Medellín cartel, get retold, reinterpreted, reimagined over time, used as a palimpsest so that with each retelling the actual historical facts and lived pain are overshadowed by sensationalism and capitalism.

This form of outsider trauma consumerism is especially detrimental to the culture whose traumas are exploited with no reparations. In Medellín, there have been countless efforts to recontextualize the Medellín cartel: to uplift the voices of the survivors of the narcoviolence and to heal rather than make capital out of such a horrific time in the city’s history. As David Rodríguez Goyes and Katja Franko stated in their article “Profiting From Pablo: Victimhood and Commercialism in A Global Society”, “narratives of atrocities have been turned into entertainment” (5): the dramatized interpretation of the rise and fall of the Medellín cartel does not evoke a feeling of distress in the viewers, or respect for the resilience of Colombians and Medellínenses. It is merely entertainment, something to be binge-watched. *Narcos* is simply “inspired by true events,” as the disclaimer before every episode states, and as such, it is not a documentary or a memoir. Combating outsider trauma consumerism is challenging when it is turned into easily accessible entertainment, as consumers might not even realize they are engaging with media that commercializes trauma.

There have been vigorous attempts by both Colombian citizens and politicians to combat what Goyes and Franko called the “global mythmaking surrounding Escobar” (12),

which they feel overshadows actual Colombian culture. The mayor of Medellín, Federico Gutiérrez, feels that these Escobar tours perpetuate the idea that Medellín has no history beyond cartels, and that they disregard the survivors' and victims' pain and suffering while continuing to exploit them. Gutiérrez has pushed for a more dignified and respectful approach towards the Medellín cartel's victims, centering them, and not the people who harmed them. On Escobar's abandoned Mónaco building until its demolishment in 2019 several signs were visible raising awareness of the atrocities both in English and Spanish, with one sign reading "Respeta nuestro dolor, honra nuestras víctimas (1983-1994). 46.612 vidas menos".¹⁸ Not only do the victims, their families, or survivors not receive any compensation or percentage from the income of these Escobar tours and media about the drug lord, but some locals feel that without the 'presence' of Escobar in Medellín, tourism would plummet, thereby reinforcing the need for dark tourism in the city.

The fantasy these narcoseries sell do not only affect behaviors while traveling to Latin America, but they also influence how Latinos and Latin Americans are viewed in the United States, specifically in the entertainment industry. In the 2014 Latino Media Gap report made by Columbia University, the three main character types for Latinos on screen were identified as "criminals, law enforcers, and cheap labor" (3), with 17,7% of roles played by Latino actors being criminals and 19,1% being law enforcement or military (17). Series that include a wider range of Latino/Latin American characters often get canceled or receive less promotion, like in the case of *One Day at a Time*, *On My Block*, or *Mayans MC*. As of 2023 the numbers have not changed significantly, as Hispanic/Latino speaking characters made up only 5.2% of total characters, with 46 films having no Hispanic/Latino speaking characters (2)¹⁹. Out of 1600 movies, 1086 had no Latina speaking characters (4), a number that follows the 2014 findings, as out of the 4218 characters included in the study, only 34.6% were female.

Narcos and *Griselda* as trauma consumerist products: examining their promotional materials

The series that do get funding and promotion include *Griselda*, starring Sofía Vergara, who worked on the series as an executive producer, as well. Promotional material for the series included a video of a large truck with the series' title on its sides and a large roll snorting cocaine off of Paris's streets, a poster (avon_barksale) highlighting Blanco's suspected involvement in 200 murders, money-filled suitcases at a Polish airport, and a snowplow truck cleaning Spanish streets with the sentence "No one moves snow like Griselda does" written on the side. Online

¹⁸ Respect our pain, honor our victims (1983-1994). 46,612 fewer lives. (Agencia AFP, Gestión)

¹⁹ According to the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's 2023 report

promotion for the series was also big: the official TikTok accounts of Netflix and its regional branches all posted the previously quoted monologue of Griselda from “Middle Management” translated to the local languages. The American Netflix account even posted animated trailers for *Griselda* highlighting her ‘innovator’ side which other promotional material also centered. The most interesting content available on TikTok, however, were the ads paid for by Netflix, posted by people like Lithuanian influencer Loreta Ruce or German influencer Jessy Hartel. These TikToks both follow a ‘me before and after watching *Griselda*’ structure, showing their ‘post-*Griselda*’ selves as more elegant, classy, and bossy, taking on the ‘girlboss’ mentality of the series. The ethicality of such advertisements is questionable: Griselda Blanco, as established in the previous chapter, was not a role model; the stylish, feminine interpretation visible on screen is not an accurate image of the queenpin. This international marketing campaign does not only sensationalize and try to ‘girlbossify’ the death of many, turning their demise into entertainment, but it also promotes the point of view that because a stylish woman was responsible for the suffering, supporting her is the feminist act rather than condemning her.

While specific numbers are unavailable, these promotional materials already exceed the marketing cost of both *On My Block* and *One Day at a Time*, two Netflix series starring Latino actors in roles other than “criminals, law enforcers, or cheap labor” (Latino Media Gap 3), even though they glamorize cartels, drug use, and the violence associated with them. While *Griselda* and *Narcos* share most of their showrunners, *Griselda* has a considerably more Colombian cast and producers, including Vergara. Considering the (compared to *Narcos*) large number of Colombians involved in the making of the series, *Griselda* could be understood as a piece of commodified trauma. However, the series, as well as the creators, perpetuate the notion that Blanco’s achievements, while violent and horrible, should be commended for the “superhuman feat that [she] pulls off, to be able to navigate this world” (Becoming Griselda 00:01:05). The series, similarly to the promotional material, frames Blanco and her actions as a feminist ‘girlboss’ running her successful empire in a male-dominated field while being a mother. What the series and showmakers fail to communicate, as in the case of *Narcos*, is the fact that these characters and the violence depicted, while partially “fictionalized for dramatization purposes” (“Descenso” 00:00:12), were real and did cause immense harm, pain, and trauma to their communities. Centering a feminist point of view in the case of a series depicting a glamorized, fictional version of a drug lord’s life, even if she was technically “a self-made woman coming out of a male-dominated culture” (Becoming Griselda 00:00:54), is

insincere and disrespectful to the (as the series' promotional poster claims) 200 murdered people's memories and relatives.

The promotional material for *Narcos* was similarly creative, engaging and visually appealing. For the 8th Annual Shorty Awards in 2016, the marketing team for *Narcos* submitted their work for the series' social media campaign. As their objectives, they voiced the aim to “create a breadth of work that matched the level of quality, entertainment, and depth that made the show itself fantastic” (“Netflix *Narcos* Social Media Campaign”), content which has “substance and value ... in addition to just entertainment” (“Netflix *Narcos* Social Media Campaign”), with the main goal being identified as making people “fall in love with the *story* of *Narcos*” (“Netflix *Narcos* Social Media Campaign”, emphasis in the original).

To achieve these goals, the team created platform-specific micro campaigns detailing smuggling tactics, an infographic series, posts sharing small tidbits of information about the Medellín cartel, and even reaction emojis. Posts included a map of Europe made out of a white powder with text above reading “At their height, the Cali cartel supplied 90% of Europe's cocaine.” (*Narcos* [@narcos]), or videos titled Learn Spanish with *Narcos* where the actors of the series teach the viewers words or phrases from the series, such as “sapo”²⁰ or “que en paz descansan”²¹. Other online promotional material included an ad ran on CNN.com promoting the series with either a short description and a release date or a picture of Escobar and the phrase “24 years ago today Pablo Escobar escaped from prison” (Hill). The marketing team follows the narrator's assumptions that the viewer is unfamiliar with not only the trafficking world, but the history of Colombia and the Spanish language, as well. While the team did not win Best Multi-Platform Campaign, they considered the campaign a success: the show was highly successful, their posts generated engagement from celebrities, making *Narcos* the “most mentioned Netflix original series on social in 2015” (“Netflix *Narcos* Social Media Campaign”). Aside from planned content, the social media managers also interacted with viewers on these platforms using GIFs from the series, bringing the series even closer to them.

Offline promotions were done in a similar manner: like the social media posts, the posters, stickers, and other forms of advertisement started appearing worldwide. A building at Puerta del Sol in Madrid was the site of *Narcos* promotions twice: once for season one with a poster featuring Wagner Moura and the sentence “Oh, blanca Navidad”²², and once for season

²⁰ Meaning snitch.

²¹ Meaning ‘rest in peace’.

²² Meaning ‘Oh, white Christmas’.

two featuring Wagner Moura and Damián Alcázar with the sentence “A rey muerto, a rey puesto”²³. Posters included one at the Delhi airport saying “Have a safe trip”, another, commonly featured poster shows the Americas with Colombia and Mexico connected by two white lines and the sentence “The route of all evil”, although that poster was created to promote *Narcos: Mexico*. The non-traditional promotional material included stickers in places where people might have consumed cocaine in the 1990s saying that “Here in the ‘90s? There’s an 80% chance this powder came from the Cali cartel”, often with a rolled-up dollar bill; or an ad column in Paris transformed into a giant, white powder-filled hourglass. As visible from these examples, offline marketing material for the series (and its main spinoff) could all be characterized as witty and ironic, featuring wordplay and double entendres. The promotional material has a similar tone to Steve’s narrations with their tone and assumptions matching.

The promotional material for *Narcos* and *Griselda*, much like the shows themselves, frame the events of the 1980s and 1990s as ‘fun’: watching the entertaining episodes, interacting with other viewers online, snickering at the witty slogans overshadow the actual devastating effects these cartels and people had not only on Colombia, but on the United States, as well. Because of these series, trauma consumerism is not confined to stalls around Medellín, it has an international economy with consumers who are unaware of the accuracy of the product they are consuming. The pan-Latin American package of *Narcos* features the collective trauma of Medellínenses and the ironic slogans featured on posters around the world together—they are inseparable from each other, as without the trauma there would be nothing to commercialize.

Conclusion

As *Narcos* progresses, the characters, specifically agent Javier Peña, start doubting the validity of their ideologies and meaning of the work they have been doing in Colombia. In the series finale of *Narcos*, Javier is talking to a high-ranking DEA officer about his resignation following the takedown of the Cali cartel, which officer disagrees with Javier’s resignation as “it’s time to take the fight to the real enemy in The War on Drugs” (“Going Back to Cali” 00:46:20). The “real enemy” in his understanding is Mexico, whose cartels he blames for starting the war on drugs by killing DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena in 1985. Relatively uncharacteristically, Javier questions the real enemy being Mexico, and even suggests that the

²³ Meaning ‘A king dead, a king alive’.

“big players” (00:46:16) he took down (referring to the Medellín and Cali cartels) are going to be replaced by an unspecified “we”, seemingly referring to the United States.

The same question might arise in the viewer as in Javier: who is the real enemy? Who could or should be blamed for the war on drugs, for the economic state of Latin America, for the deaths of hundreds? The answer the high-ranking DEA agent provides blames the countries themselves, while Javier seemingly came to a different conclusion, one that blames the US for destabilizing a region and then diverting the blame. While answering these questions was not an aim of this paper, throughout the various chapters of this essay I explored different aspects of the series related to them. Starting with the notion of ‘magical realism’, a phrase incorrectly defined and used in the series: because the narration constantly misuses the term viewers might assume that the events of the series are consequences of the ‘incapable’ people of Colombia rather than of history. The historical accuracy of the series was also explored with the conclusion that while *Narcos* is seemingly a semi-documentary, it is often historically inaccurate, promoting a United States understanding of historical events. Two narratives which decenter heterosexual males were also examined, with attention paid to female and queer traffickers in *Narcos* and *Griselda*. These narratives ‘girlbossify’ trafficking: *Griselda* presents the success of Griselda Blanco as a feminist victory, *Narcos* uses Pacho Herrera and his queerness to minimize the negative effects of the Cali cartel. These analyzed aspects are united under the concept of ‘trauma consumerism’, without which neither series would exist. As Medellínenses suffer from a commercializable collective trauma, multiple people try profiting off of it from streaming giants like Netflix to family members of the late traffickers.

Answering the question of who the “real enemy” is is complicated: can one person, one institution be blamed for a chain of events as complicated as those in *Narcos* or *Griselda*? The “many violences” (Melguizo and Cronshaw 113) present in Medellín are present here as well, it is impossible to find a scapegoat for deaths and fear that paralyzed Medellín for decades. Rather than trying to answer that question, attempts at recontextualizing the cartel-related violence to center the voices of those who experienced it first- or second-hand should be made: narcomedia should highlight the resilience of Medellínenses, not celebrate the perpetrators of violence.

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