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Narcos Television and Trump's Politics of Fear

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This study investigates the ways in which the Netflix Narcos television series reinforces negative images of Latinos as dangerous drug dealers who threaten the safety and sanctity of U.S. citizens. It also explores how it both reflects and supports President Trump's politics of fear that not only got him elected, but has broadened and strengthened his support from conservatives since. An in-depth exploration of selected scenes from episodes of three Netflix series: *Narcos, Narcos: Mexico, and El Chapo* offers evidence of why such programs have become so popular for American viewers and continue to propagate Donald Trump's political pulpit of fear of illegal immigrants coming across the border to destroy conservative white America's way of life. Based on the analysis of these three series, it becomes clear that their popularity can perhaps be traced to Donald Trump's unexpected 2016 presidential win and his manipulative, and so far effective, use of politics of fear. In this context, the Netflix series mocks US law and journalism, which supports Trump's political agenda even further.

Keywords: *Narcos*, images of Latinos, Trump's politics of fear, War on Drugs, drug dealers

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1) Introduction

In the 1970s, the Nixon Administration became the first US presidency to use war as a rhetorical metaphor in the campaign to prevent drug use and addiction. However, as Stuart explains, the "'War on Drugs' really did not become the brand name until succeeding presidencies" (Stuart 2011: 8). Searching the archives of officially recorded statements from the American Presidency Project, Stuart notes, "the rhetoric intensified exponentially under President Ronald Reagan and went supernova under President George H.W. Bush" (Stuart 2011: 9). On October 14, 1982, as Cabañas cites, Reagan "explicitly redirected the War on Drugs by authorizing military and intelligence agency action in drug-producing nations and harsher criminalization of drug use at home" (Cabañas 2014: 5). Linking the act of stopping illegal suppliers in order to eliminate ultimately the demand for hard drugs, Reagan did not parse his rhetoric, using terms, as Stuart summarizes, such as "battlefield", "military intelligence", "the deployment of the armed forces", "battle", and "crusade" (Stuart 2011: 9).

America's addiction to cocaine during the Eighties was a slap in the face for Reagan's feel-good, "It's morning in America" presidency.[1] When Reagan took office in 1981, he promised to crack down on drug abuse and reinvigorate Nixon's War on Drugs initiated in the early 1970s. Reagan's anti-drug efforts included the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which allotted $1.7 billion for the War on Drugs and included mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain drug offenses. This resulted in skyrocketing incarceration for drug-related crimes and greater media awareness of America's drug addiction, particularly cocaine use. However, as Getchell rightly points out: "Though it is difficult to determine how personally invested Reagan was in the drug war, it was certainly consistent with his own deeply held sense of American identity, traditions, and values" (Getchell 2018).

[1] Troy writes about how Reagan "invented" the 1980s, and when he ran for reelection in 1984, his campaign message was "Morning in America", which Troy describes as follows: "The most prevalent myth about the 1980s is that Ronald Reagan somehow turned back the clock to the age of Ozzie and Harriet. Reagan in fact led Americans 'Back to the Future', as the popular movies from the 1980s suggested. Reagan's brand of easy listening nationalism and feel good consumerist libertinism reassured many Americans, and conjured up warm nostalgic feelings while pushing the nation forward politically and culturally, for better and worse" (Troy 2005).

Reagan's War on drugs went far beyond his domestic policies: he used it as a weapon to fight what he viewed as "narcoterrorism" in Latin America, believing that Cuba and Nicaragua were "smuggling drugs into the United States to destabilize American society and then using the profits to finance a Marxist revolution in the Western Hemisphere" (Getchell 2018). At first, Reagan used "narcoterrorism" as a rhetorical weapon, but it soon "evolved as a way to portray communist insurgencies in Latin America as a national security threat to the United States" (Getchell 2018). During the 1985 *Movimiento de 19 Abril*[2] guerrilla attack on the Colombian Palace of Justice, destroyed documents included extradition requests for major drug traffickers such as Pablo Escobar. The "previously distinct dangers of communist insurgency and drugs became inextricably linked in the public imagination" (Getchell 2018).

While the Clinton presidency softened the war rhetoric by focusing on prevention and drug addiction treatment efforts, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US rejuvenated the War on Drugs to coincide and compete with the War on Terror. While the War on Drugs started with a "legitimate enemy, drug abuse" (Stuart 2011: 36), Stuart explains the rhetoric became a branding and marketing strategy to recruit soldiers:

> At the outset, "us-versus-them" militarized rhetoric was the pathos, but it was not the logos. By midwar, however, the federal government had used the powerful engine of our rule of law to identify children as the enemy.[3] Today, the militarized rhetoric has skipped the abstraction and individualized the enemy—each other—without a moral reason in sight for doing so (Stuart 2011: 36).

Ahead of the US presidential campaign in 2016, real estate mogul and reality television star Donald Trump entered the race, adding the War on Immigrants to the concomitant Wars on Terror and Drugs. On June 16, 2015, announcing his campaign for the 2016 presidential election, Trump declared: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best…They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists…" (Washington Post Staff 2015). Whereas the Reagan War on Drugs occasionally was more nuanced and covert in

[2] "In November 1985, Movimento de 19 Abril (M19) guerrillas infiltrated the Columbian Palace of Justice, taking hostage the entire Columbian Supreme Court and destroying documents, many of which were US extradition requests for major narcotics traffickers. A report later surfaced that Pablo Escobar, head of the notorious cocaine-trafficking Medellín cartel, had paid the guerrillas close to a million dollars for the episode. The incident drew attention to what some US and Latin American officials began to call *narco-terrorism*" (Reeves 2012: 572f.).

[3] Noting various court cases surrounding schools and the constitutionality of random drug testing, search-and-seizure protocols and freedom of expression, Stuart writes: "For Reagan, the War focused on the racial underclass whereas President George H.W. Bush's War took on a moralistic view that waged battle on those who were [quote Elkins] "more dependent, less fulfilled, lacking in 'social currency,' as well as those who do not accept the model of sober autonomy on which 'our nation's notion of liberty is rooted" [quote ends]" (Elkins 2010: 226 in Stuart 2011: 33). See also Elkins (2010).

references to racial and ethnic concerns and fears, "Trump launched his campaign on a racist political platform based on anti-Mexicanism—a long-standing American tradition embraced mostly by millions of white citizens/voters" (Huerta 2017).

And, as Tackett and Habermann suggest, no US president "has deployed fear quite like Donald J. Trump" (Tackett / Habermann 2019).[4] Three central pillars set up Trump's context for instigating xenophobia about Mexico, according to Schubert: "[…] crime caused by illegal immigration, […] problems in trade and economy, and […] deceitful actions of the Mexican government" (Schubert 2017: 50). Schubert adds that Trump cited the crime reference at the beginning of his 2015 announcement "in the form of example, which was abundantly quoted in the news media and drew tremendous attention to Trump's political agenda" (Schuber 2017: 50). His populist rhetoric legitimized and amplified the inherent textual coding of "anti-Mexicanism" that long has been reflected in how Latinos in general have been portrayed on American television for decades.[5]

2) Telecinematic Portrayal and Representation

Televised negative images of Latinos have fueled Trump's politics of fear and his desire to build a wall to keep these "bad hombres"[6] out of America. For decades, Hollywood has depicted Latinos on television as bandits, drug dealers, harlots and prostitutes on television, including in children's cartoons and films. Popular Netflix television series such as *Narcos* (2015-2017), *Narcos: Mexico* (2018-present),[7] and *El Chapo* (2017-2018)[8] seem to have reinvigorated America's fear of the 'dangerous Latino'. This plays effectively into the rhetoric of Trump's immigration policies. While Trump is certainly not the first to bring this fear of Latinos into politics,[9] he has certainly taken it to a hyper-level of urgency, all while stripping away any tactful or nuanced parsing and leaving no doubts about his intended meaning.

[4] "In an interview as a presidential candidate in 2016 with Bob Woodward and Robert Costa of The Washington Post, Mr. Trump said, 'Real power is – I don't even want to use the word – fear'" (Trump in Tackett / Haberman 2019).
[5] See Rios (2015), Cocking (2017), and Nittle (2019).
[6] On May 17, 2019 President Trump Tweeted: "Border Patrol is apprehending record numbers of people at the Southern Border. The bad 'hombres,' of which there are many, are being detained & will be sent home" (Trump in Dopp 2019).
[7] Both *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico* were created by Chris Brancato, Carlo Bernard and Doug Miro.
[8] Created by Silvana Aguirre and Carlos Contreras.
[9] According to Gustavo Arellano: "Demonizing Mexicans as rapists is a time-honored tradition of American letters and politics. The idea that *hombres* are fundamentally devious perverts hell-bent on violating the honor of white and Mexican women alike is soldered on the American psyche […] But [Trump's] stereotyping of Mexicans as sexual predators wasn't original […]" (Gustavo Arrellano 2015). "In 2007, Dana Rohrabacher […] stated from the floor of Congress, [quote Rohrabacher] "If you get raped or murdered or run over by a drunk in California in my area, it's likely it's been done by someone who should never have been there legally in the first place"[quote end] (Rohrabacher in Arellano 2015) and "The year before, Texas congressman Ted Poe told his colleagues [quote Poe]

More than three decades ago, on American television, the drug trade and the War on Drugs was glamorized in Anthony Yerkovich's hugely popular series, *Miami Vice* (1984-1990), starring two hip and cool undercover narcotics agents: Don Johnson as 'Sonny' Crockett and Phillip Michael Thomas as Ricardo Tubbs. The majority of Mexican and Latin American drug cartel cocaine shipments to the United States arrived in Miami before spreading across the nation, and as Ilana Berman puts it: "*Miami Vice* was revolutionary in the way it married the glamour of a city to the grit of the trade" (Berman 2013). However, shows like *Miami Vice* did not focus on the drug lords themselves. Even though Americans might have been aware of where cocaine and marijuana were coming from in 1985, the drug cartels and the men and women behind them, would not come into focus on television until much later.

The rising popularity of network television coincided with a growing research interest among media scholars about the effects of portrayal and representation in primetime series, particularly those dealing with crime and violence. Cultivation theory, social identity theory and the mean world syndrome would explain these, in part. Introducing a study about the depictions of Latinos on television, Mastro and Behm-Morawitz explain that "cultivation theory proposes that long-term exposure to television's stable set of selective messages ultimately shifts viewers' social perceptions towards the television version of reality, regardless of its accuracy" (Mastro / Behm-Morawitz 2005: 111). When politicians and elected officials, particularly those with the media savviness of Trump, reinforce fictional representations with artificially constructed comparisons interpreting real-world events and circumstances, the cultivation effect extends the effects of social identity theory. As Mastro and Behm-Morawitz explain:

> From this perspective, the sheer quantity of media representation becomes important (i.e., first order cultivation) as the rate of minority occurrences represents the "group's strength in the intergroup context" and reflects the social value and status of the group. Additionally, the exact nature of these portrayals (i.e., second order cultivation) indicates normative and appropriate intergroup relations (Mastro / Behm-Morawitz 2005: 112).

Therefore, even while positive character portrayals have become more frequent than in prior decades, negative representations of Latinos persist. Supplemented by the plain messaging of a leader who has made nativist rhetoric the platform for an anti-immigrant campaign predicated heavily on fear, "the potential for cultivating harmful racial perceptions, which may be used in subsequent interracial interactions, is considerable" (Mastro / Behm-Morawitz 2005: 126).

"illegals in this country contribute a vast over-percentage of violent crime and street crime, from theft to rape to murder"[quote end]" (Poe in Arellano 2015).

As television platforms have evolved through the cable era and the introduction of streaming-on-demand platforms (e.g., Netflix), scholars are just beginning to explore if the effects of cultivation theory and observations of the mean world syndrome—"TV violence should likely discourage a world view that people are generally altruistic, thoughtful, and trustworthy" (Krongard / Tsay-Vogel 2018: 7)—have greater valence in the post-network era. With the capacity for individual consumers to customize their content preferences and selections on Netflix or competing streaming platforms, "viewers may selectively expose themselves to only programs that reinforce their existing world views […] or those that help them manage or cope with their moods […] [or] individuals who already view the world as a fearful place lacking altruism choose to consume violent programming" (Krongard / Tsay-Vogel 2018: 9). Thus, it becomes worthwhile to examine if the aggregated effects of streaming on-demand availability, the popularity of storylines signifying narco culture, and the rhetoric of the current US president (Trump) have intensified the perceptions of fears, when compared to those observed in prior decades.

3) Netflix's Surprise Hit: *Narcos*

Prior to Trump's presidency and the popular Netflix series *Narco*s, Americans got a taste of the brutality of Mexican drug cartels in Vince Gilligan's hugely popular AMC series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). The show followed the transformation of a terminally ill high school science teacher, Walter White (Bryan Cranston), into a ruthless methamphetamine drug supplier who eventually finds himself at odds with the Mexican drug cartels. The series portrayed two particularly ruthless and fearsome characters: Tuco Salamanca (Raymond Cruz), a psychopathic Mexican drug kingpin, and Hector Salamanca (Mark Margolis), a former high-ranking member of the Juarez Cartel. In keeping with the theme of violent Latino criminals, Tuco is unpredictable and prone to violent outbursts, while his uncle Hector is portrayed as a sinister and evil former cartel leader. The series is filled with violent scenes and heinous acts of terror, carried out particularly by 'the Cousins', Leonel and Marco Salamanca (Daniel and Luis Moncada) who are hitmen for the Ciudad Juárez Mexican Drug Cartel. They kill without hesitation, and their presence is made all the more fearsome by their almost robot-like demeanor, seemingly void of any human emotion.

Despite the success of *Breaking Bad* in the United States, when Netflix released *Narcos* in 2015, "The Pablo Escobar-focused first season was aimed solely at increasing Netflix subscriptions in South America and Europe. However, few expected a largely Spanish-speaking series to become the streaming giant's biggest hit" (Power 2018). Netflix's strategy

acknowledged, in part, the success of Telemundo[10], which competed with Univision, its chief rival for Spanish-speaking audiences, by investing in 'narco telenovelas' that have been distributed globally to viewers, including China and Africa, after their premieres in Spanish-speaking markets. Typically, a local telenovela went transnational only when the series succeeded in the original target market. However, one of Telemundo's greatest successes was *La Reina del Sur*[11] (2011), and 'the global nature of La Reina's production and distribution marks a departure from the norm' (Jaramillo 2014: 1600). The series premiered on Telemundo network affiliates in the US and in Spain before being expanded into the Mexican television market.

In *La Reina del Sur*, the protagonist was a young woman (Teresa) from Sinaloa who eventually becomes a dominant drug trafficker in Spain, and the narrative follows episodes of violence and life-threatening situations in California, Morocco and Colombia. "Teresa is a fully formed character; by virtue of being the protagonist, she is multidimensional and humanizes what was previously a thuggish character type on US television" (Jaramillo 2014: 1597). If there is one dimension that connects *Breaking Bad* to *La Reina del Sur*, it is the significance of the US-Mexico border in its effects upon the respective protagonists of both series, as "Mexico ends up being a character that all of our protagonists have ambivalent relationships with, but that character has accumulated considerably more personality than it has in the past" (Jaramillo 2014: 1602).

Narcos earned favorable reviews and high ratings during its three-season run.[12] By the time of his death in December 1993, Pablo Escobar, founder and head of the Medellin Cartel, was the best-known Colombian drug lord, and *Narcos* offers a thorough, personal approach to portraying how he built his empire. The first two seasons were shot on location in Medellin,

[10] As Jaramillo explains: "Telemundo's parent company, NBC Universal, is owned by Comcast, one of the five largest media conglomerates in the USA. Comcast owns two broadcast networks, multiple cable networks, and is the largest cable operator in the USA" (Jaramillo 2014: 1595).

[11] "'La Reina del Sur'" finale was the #1 broadcast program regardless of language at 10 pm last night among adults 18–34, men 18–49 and men 18–34. The telenovela's finale was #2, regardless of language, behind ABC's series premiere of 'Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition' in the 10 pm hour among adults 18–49. The finale of 'La Reina del Sur' more than doubled (+125%) the delivery of the network's previous most-watched finale, 'El Clon,' which averaged over 1.2 million adults 18–49 (1,252,000) when it aired on December 10, 2002" (Gorman in Cabañas 2014: 10).

[12] IGN gave the first season a 7.8 out of 10 score, saying: "It's a true-to-life account, sometimes to a fault, of the rise of Pablo Escobar and the hunt that brought him down laced with stellar performances and tension-filled stand-offs. It's [sic.] blend of archival footage reminds us that the horrors depicted really happened, but also manage to present an Escobar that is indefensible but frighteningly sympathetic" (Wheatley 2015); *The Philadelphia Inquirer* critic, Tirdad Derakhshani called it: "Intense, enlightening, brilliant, unnerving, and addictive, *Narcos* is high-concept drama at its finest" (Derakhshani 2015).

and the show is packed with action and violence that one would expect in a show about drug trafficking.

Perhaps the darkest moment of *Narcos* occurs in Season 1, Episode 6, 'Explosivos' (Baiz 2015), when Escobar, played brilliantly by Brazilian actor Wagner Moura, recruits Jaime 'Jaimito' Ortega Carrera (German de Griff) to unknowingly blow up Avianca Flight 203 on November 27, 1989.[13] Carrera was recruited off the streets as a cocaine courier for Escobar and later brought into his inner circle to gain his trust. The viewer finds Escobar welcoming him into the family over dinner before later visiting his home and promising him a large sum of money to take care of his wife and newborn daughter. His job was simple: to record a conversation between two politicians. Little did he know that Escobar had ordered a bomb be planted in the cassette recorder, and Carrera unwittingly blew up the plane shortly after takeoff when he pressed the play button, killing 110 people and himself. To make matters worse, Escobar orders the killing of his wife afterwards. All of this is planned with cold-blooded accuracy by Escobar who intended to kill presidential candidate César Gaviria Trujillo. This episode is a chilling example showing how sinister Escobar could be, not caring who got hurt as long as he got what he wanted. While not an outwardly violent act carried out by Escobar himself, it leaves American audiences wondering what evils drug lords are capable of committing in the United States if they can kill their own so easily.

In short, Pablo Escobar was willing to do anything to ensure that his cocaine would reach the United States, where it would earn him billions of dollars in profit.[14] However, despite his ruthlessness, in a portrayal that reminds of the fatherly figure of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* from the 1972 film by Francis Ford Coppola, Moura plays Escobar in *Narcos* "as a somewhat sensitive soul, who genuinely believed he was a force for good in his impoverished home town with political aspirations" (Power 2018). This is ironic, considering he leveled a city block with

[13] On November 27, 1989, Avianca Flight 203, a Colombian domestic passenger flight, took off from El Dorado International Airport in Bogotá bound for Alfonso Bonilla Aragón International Airport in Cali. Five minutes into the flight, a bomb was detonated, killing all 107 people on board as well as three people on the ground, making it the single deadliest criminal attack in decades of violence in Colombia. The attack was planned by Pablo Escobar, believing it would kill presidential candidate César Gaviria Trujillo, but Gaviria was not on the plane and went on to become the president of Colombia. Dandeny Muñoz Mosquera, the Medellin Cartel's chief assassin, was convicted of the bombing by a US District Court, and was sentenced to 10 consecutive life sentences. In *Narcos*, the bombing is portrayed as having been carried out unwittingly by a naïve new recruit of Escobar's cartel. The death of two Americans on board prompted the Bush Administration to begin Intelligence Support Activity operations to find Escobar (see Rockefeller 2016).

[14] By the mid-1980s, Escobar's Medellin Cartel was shipping as much as 11 to 15 tons of cocaine per flight in jetliners to the United States and was making over $70 million per day (about $26 billion per year). His cartel spent $4,000 per month on rubber bands to wrap the stacks of cash, much of which had to be buried due to lack of storage space, and 10 percent had to be written off as "spoilage" either from water damage or rats (see Escobar 2009).

a truck bomb in order to kill Colombian politicians, officials and journalists.[15] During his promotion of *Narcos* in 2015, Moura told Power: "He [Escobar] was a contradiction. He was a big murderer, an assassin […] At the same time, he was someone who loved his kids and his wife – was very generous to the poor. Someone who dealt in cocaine, but liked to smoke marijuana. He was very human – very, very complex" (Moura in Power 2018). Still, *Narcos* shows there is no denying the sinister side to this former king of the Colombian drug trade.

Some have even drawn parallels between Escobar and Trump. James Norton, in his 2016 article, 'Narcos and Trump: On the Appeal of Going Out Like a Gangster', describes Escobar's character in *Narcos* as an "entertainment gangster" who crushes his enemies "through wit and violence" and makes "a case for a nihilistic embrace of greed and raw power" (Norton 2016). For Norton, Trump's presidential campaign is reflected in *Narcos* in that it undermined "all norms under the guise of truth-telling, but — in practical terms — [is] an embrace of the gangster's ethos: 'Screw the rules,' it suggests, 'get what's yours, and the devil take the other guy — the immigrant, the urban poor, the gays, the blacks, and so forth". Whether or not viewers agree with this comparison, due to the unexpected success of the first three seasons, Netflix decided to move the series hundreds of miles north for *Narcos: Mexico*, where the violence and bloodshed become even more intense, cultivating the environment for Trump's politics of fear to become more entrenched.

After Escobar's death in Season 2, *Narcos* Season 3 focuses on the DEA's hunt for the leaders of the Cali Cartel for whom, with Escobar out of the picture, business is booming with new cocaine markets opening up in the United States and around the world.[16] Most of the action and bloodshed continues to take place in Colombia, including a gruesome scene in Episode 1, 'The Kingpin Strategy' (Baiz 2017a), in which Pacho Herrera (Alberto Ammann) and his bikers tear Claudio Salazar's (Carlos Humberto Camacho) limbs from his body as each rides in a different

[15] On December 6, 1989, a truck bomb attack targeting the Administrative Department of Security (DAS) headquarters in Bogotá, Colombia, killed 52 and injured about 1,000 (including innocent women and children), leveled several city blocks, and destroyed more than 300 commercial properties. It is widely believed that Escobar was responsible for the attack in his attempt to assassinate DAS director Miguel Maza Márquez, who escaped unharmed. The DAS bombing was the last in a long series of attacks targeting Colombian politicians, officials and journalists in 1989, which began with Escobar's January 18 killing of 12 judicial officials in Simacota (see Rockefeller 2016).

[16] See Shannon (1991).

direction.[17] However, one character in particular, Chepe Santacruz Londoño[18] (Pêpê Rapazote) brings the violence home to the United States as the Cali Cartel's head of operations in New York City.[19] In Episode 2, 'The Cali KGB' (Baiz 2017b), Chepe guns down a group of Dominican rivals in their hair salon headquarters with an Uzi hidden under his barber's gown, a bloodbath reminiscent of a similar scene in *The Godfather: Part II* (Coppola 1974). Prior to this scene, all of the *Narcos* violence occurred in Colombia, but seeing such bloodshed in New York City only reinforces Trump's image of the dangerous Latinos south of the border who are capable of wreaking havoc on American soil, even if they aren't from Mexico.

4) Getting Too Close for Comfort – *Narcos: Mexico*

Hot on the heels of the success of *Narcos*, Netflix decided to rebrand the show and move it north as *Narcos: Mexico*. Keeping the same gritty, violent realism as *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico* shifts the perspective and focuses on the DEA's attempts to bring down the Guadalajara Cartel in the 1980s while trying to convince Washington bureaucrats to fund their efforts. The two main characters are cartel leader Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (Diego Luna) and DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena (Michael Peña). With Escobar out of the picture, Gallardo eventually becomes the most powerful drug lord in Mexico, commonly referred to as 'El Padrino' (The Godfather). Like Pablo Escobar before him, Gallardo will stop at nothing to ensure his drug empire will succeed, and once again, creators Carlo Bernard, Chris Brancato and Doug Miro present us with graphic violence and bloodshed at the hands of ruthless Mexican banditos. This seems to be "exactly what US audiences want to see when they peek into the illicit world of drug trafficking" (Zatarain 2019). While Gallardo, like Escobar in *Narcos*, is presented as a complex and savvy businessman, *Narcos: Mexico* continues to feed Trump's politics of fear narrative of "the phantom threat of Mexicans as rapists, murderers, and monsters messily flowing into the US, bringing drugs, bringing crime" (Zatarain 2019).

[17] Former Cali Cartel head of security turned top informant "who almost single-handedly brought down the cartel", is currently under witness protection and acted as a consultant on *Narcos*, Season 3 and stated: "I saw one episode, the first or something, where they pull apart one bad guy with two motorcycles. I will say, though it's horrendous, it's not far from the [actual] happenings. They did that the same. Not with Harleys, they used two Land Cruisers. I wasn't there, but I had people who were actually in the execution of these things" (Salcedo in Shepherd 2017).

[18] José Santacruz Londoño, also known as Chepe or Don Chepe, and the Rodríquez Orejuela brothers formed the Cali Cartel in the 1970s. At one point, they were supplying 80 percent of the US and 90 percent of the European cocaine market (U.S. Government 1989).

[19] Chepe moved to New York City to keep the Cali Cartel's operation alive after Colombia banned a main ingredient needed to refine cocaine. In an interview with *Latin Times*, actor Rapazote said about his character: "He was the most successful narco ever to live in the US [who] pretended to be a real estate developer", and "his character was very violent because […] it was business. He had to kill in a ferocious business to protect his territory" (Rapazote in Gómez 2017).

One of the most graphic and disturbing scenes occurs in Season 1, Episode 7, 'Jefe de Jefes' (Ruizpalacios 2018) when two American tourists are brutally killed by a paranoid Rafael 'Rafa' Caro Quintero (Tenoch Huerta) in a Mexican restaurant because he thought they were undercover DEA agents.[20] The scene starts out innocently enough, with the two Americans entering the La Loca Langosta seafood restaurant for dinner. They even announce to the staff, "We're tourists from the United States". While waiting for their meal, they are discussing ideas for a travel book about Mexico they are writing together and taking notes, which catches the attention of Rafa and his men, who tell him: "They're writing your name, Rafa. They're cops!". A coked-up Rafa shoots one of the men and brutally kicks and stabs the other before hacking the already dead first man in the chest with an ice pick. This scene represents the ideology of much of Trump's 2016 campaign: "Here are a group of bloodthirsty Mexicans savagely murdering two innocent Americans in Mexico. Don't let this happen at home!".

Equally disturbing is the scene in Episode 9, 'Lope de Vega' (Baiz 2018) in which DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena, played by Michael Peña, is repeatedly tortured, revived with adrenaline by a doctor, and tortured some more. It includes a particularly savage scene when one of Gallardo's thugs drills a hole through Kiki's left hand. Camarena is finally found dead in the final episode, and Gallardo uses tape recordings of Kiki's torture and ultimate death to buy his freedom, and he continues to run his drug empire with "an army of corrupt police at his disposal" (Strause 2018). Kiki's murder in 1985 launched the largest DEA homicide investigations ever undertaken and will probably be the focus of Season 2.[21] If Americans might have doubted the reality of the perception of Mexico as a corrupt and lawless country, as presented in *Narcos: Mexico*, Trump did not hesitate to remove any gray areas. At the

[20] Rafael 'Rafa' Caro Quintero was responsible for revolutionizing the marijuana drug trade by creating a seedless and potent marijuana plant. He is allegedly responsible for the 1985 murder of two American tourists, John Clay Walker and Alberto Radelat, but it is unclear if he actually committed the murders or ordered his "sicarios" to do so. As portrayed in *Narcos: Mexico*, Rafa was arrested in Costa Rica in 1985 for the kidnapping, torture and murder of DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena and was released from prison in 2013 after serving 28 years of his 40-year sentence. Since his release, he has remained on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list with the US offering a $20 million award for information leading to his capture. In a 2016 interview with Proceso, the 66-year-old Quintero denied responsibility for the murder of Camarena and apologized to Camarena's family, the DEA and US government, and the Mexican people (see Yemi 2018).

[21] DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena was able to infiltrate deep into Gallardo's drug trafficking organization, even posing as a worker on Gallardo's giant marijuana farm, "Rancho Bufalo" in Chihuahua, Mexico, which was known to be protected by Mexican DFS intelligence agents and with the knowledge of local Mexican police, politicians, and the military. Because Camarena was starting to expose the connections between drug traffickers and Mexican law enforcement and government officials, Gallardo ordered the kidnapping of Camarena on February 7, 1985. He was brutally tortured for 30 hours before being killed on February 9 when a hole was drilled in his head with a powerful electric drill. His shrink-wrapped body was later found in a shallow hole on a ranch in Michoacán state. DEA Operation Leyenda included a special unit to coordinate the investigation in Mexico, where corrupt officials were implicated. Gallardo's arrest on April 8, 1989 exposed widespread corruption at political and law enforcement levels in Mexico. Gallardo remains jailed at age 73 in a minimum-security prison in Guadalajara.

Republican presidential debate on 16 August 2015, Trump said, "Our politicians are stupid. And the Mexican government is much smarter, much sharper, much more cunning. And they send the bad ones over because they don't want to pay for them. They don't want to take care of them" (Trump in Peters / Woolley 2015). The point was, as Schubert explains, to present Trump both as "intellectually superior" to the Democratic presidential candidates and "morally superior" to the Mexican government (Schubert 2017: 52).

5) The Most Feared Man on the Planet: *El Chapo*

With the success of *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico*, Netflix, in cooperation with Univision, launched yet another drug trafficking series in 2017 based on the life of notorious Sinaloa Cartel Mexican drug lord Joaquin Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, known as 'El Chapo' (Shorty) due to his mere 168-centimetre stature, a man who became the most powerful drug trafficker in the world.[22] El Chapo has "been called everything from the Usama bin Laden of the drug cartel world to the most 'ruthless, dangerous, and feared man on the planet'" (McKay 2018). Like Pablo Escobar, Guzmán came from humble roots before rising to power, and "[i]n Sinaloa today, Guzmán is as respected and admired by locals as he is reviled by law enforcement" (Bonello 2017). El Chapo is famous for funneling cocaine into the United States through underground tunnels and escaping from Mexican prison not once, but twice: first by bribing a guard in 2001 and escaping in a laundry cart to avoid extradition to the United States,[23] and again in 2015 from a maximum-security prison through a tunnel.[24] Both of these escapes are portrayed in Netflix's *El Chapo* series which, like *Narcos: Mexico*, exposes Mexican police and government corruption. After being captured in 2016 and extradited to the United States, Guzmán stood trial, and his 30-year reign of terror came to an end when a federal judge in New York City sentenced the 62-year-old to life in prison in a 'supermax' penitentiary in Florence, Colorado, a place where no prisoner has ever escaped. Despite his small stature, El Chapo was

[22] As head of the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico, El Chapo ran one of the world's largest drug operations, shipping cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin to over five continents until his capture in 2016 (see Garcia 2017).

[23] After Mexico's Supreme Court made extradition between Mexico and the US easier, Guzmán bribed prison guards to aid in his escape. On January 19, 2001, prison guard Francisco 'El Chito' Rivera helped Guzmán escape in a laundry cart pushed by maintenance worker Javier Camberos, who then drove him out of town in the trunk of a car. Both Camberos and the prison director were jailed for aiding in his escape, and Guzmán yielded great power within the prison, including smuggling contraband into the prison and receiving preferential treatment from prison staff. In addition, Guzmán paid Jalisco police to ensure that he had at least 24 hours to escape and avoid the subsequent military manhunt.

[24] On July 11, 2015, Guzmán escaped from a maximum-security prison from an elaborate underground tunnel leading from the shower area to a house 1.5 km away in a Santa Juanita neighborhood. The tunnel included a motorcycle on which it is believed Guzmán rode to freedom. As a result of his escape, several officials and police officers were indicted, as it would have been impossible for this tunnel to be built without outside help and corruption.

a brutal cartel leader who smuggled over $12 billion dollars-worth of drugs "and plunged his country into a long-running tragedy of bloodshed and corruption" (Feuer 2019).[25]

El Chapo portrays Guzmán (Marco de la O) as a family man with a chip on his shoulder, always trying to prove that he is the greatest drug lord to ever live and willing to do anything to ensure everyone knows this. But make no mistake: despite his willingness to risk capture to see his wife and children as well as his mother, Guzmán yields his power with violence and murder on anyone who gets in his way. The very first episode in Season 1 (Contreras / Cravioto 2017a) contains a particularly disturbing scene. El Chapo makes an unbreakable promise with Pablo Escobar to move cocaine across the US border through his tunnel in only 48 hours. He employs dozens of poor Mexican farm workers to dig the tunnel, and once it's completed, we see the workers getting paid and being served sandwiches and beer. The men look happy and content, unaware that Guzmán has ordered his men to "kill all the workers who built the tunnel. Everyone, except for the engineer. No one can know where it is". As Guzmán is carrying the coffin at his father's funeral, the tunnel workers are gunned down. Right away, we learn that this so-called 'family man' is a cold-blooded killer. However, El Chapo and his family also suffer at the hands of their rival cartel leaders.

In Episode 3 of Season 1 (Contreras / Cravioto 2017b), the Avadaño brothers, rival cartel leaders, order the killing of Hector Palma Salazar's, 'El Güero' (Juan Pablo Acosta) wife and two young children by tricking his wife, Guadalupe (Abril Schreiber) into leaving her husband and escaping to Venezuela. After convincing Guadalupe to join him, her secret lover, Rafael Clavel 'El Buenmozo' (Miguel Alfonso Gutierrez) drugs her children and kills her in a Caracas hotel. Then Rafael drives onto a bridge in the middle of the night and drops the sleeping children, wrapped in a blanket, into the dark river below. If these scenes were not chilling enough, the Avadaño brothers send El Güero's wife's head to him in an icebox. Unfortunately, these gruesome events depicted in the television series are not figments of a writer's imagination, but actually occurred, with slightly different – but just as gruesome – details.[26] The message is clear: In addition to brutally killing their rivals, Mexican drug lords and their henchmen kill innocent men, women and children, all in the name of "business comes first".

[25] US Judge Brian M. Cogan "noted that the 'overwhelming evil' of the drug lord's crimes was readily apparent. Beyond the life sentence — plus an additional 30 years — he ordered him to pay a staggering $12.6 billion in forfeiture" (Feuer 2019).

[26] Venezuelan Rafael Clavel Moreno's mission was to infiltrate the closest circle of 'El Güero' Palma by first marrying Palma's sister and then becoming Palma's wife's lover, Guadalupe Leija, convincing her to take two million pesos from her accounts and escape with him to San Francisco, where they once stayed at a hotel and he proceeded to cut her throat. Fifteen days later, he took Héctor Jesús and Nataly, sons of Héctor and Guadalupe to San Cristóbal, Venezuela, where he proceeded to throw them from the bridge of La Concordia. In addition to videotaping the terrible event, he sent Guadalupe's head to Palma in a cooler.

Like Pablo Escobar, El Chapo has been compared to a modern-day Robin Hood and remains a popular figure today in his home state of Sinaloa, Mexico. His international narcotics enterprise has provided job opportunities to the locals and exposed the widespread corruption of the Mexican government and police. This has made him a hero to many of Mexico's working class. Indeed, El Chapo's story, his "rise from a poor family in rural Sinaloa to ruthless head of an all-powerful cartel, is one of legend in Mexico" (Alexander 2017). But make no mistake, across the border with his arrest and life sentence in the United States, El Chapo is viewed exactly as Trump wants him to be viewed: as a bloodthirsty bandit.

After Guzmán's second escape in 2015, Trump reportedly received threats[27] from a Twitter account with the username @ElChapOGuzman, after he blamed "corrupt Mexican officials" for Guzmán's escape. In true Trump style, he used this threat for political gain by stating: "I'm fighting for much more than myself. I'm fighting for the future of our country, which is being overrun by criminals. You can't be intimidated. This is too important" (Trump in Reuters in Washington 2015). However, it appears that Trump was intimidated enough to contact the FBI about the Twitter threat. One can never be sure about the truth of Trump's claims, given his obsession with mythopoesis. In January 2016, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an interview that actor Sean Penn conducted with El Chapo, whom Penn described as resembling in manner the character of Tony Montana from Oliver Stone's *Scarface* (De Palma 1983). Penn writes, "I mention Trump. El Chapo smiles, ironically saying, 'Ah! Mi amigo!'" (Penn 2016).

6) Conclusion

In his 2018 *New York Times* article, 'Commander of Fear', Charles M. Blow states: "Trump has found — or has always had — a winning populism perfectly suited for this moment in our history, when the anxious, scared hateful and callous desire an unapologetic voice that has the backing of actual power" (Blow 2018). In a perverse way, he flipped Reagan's feel-good "it's morning in America" (Troy 2005) persona and created "a magical mixture" that makes "being afraid feel like fun" (Blow 2018). Trump's followers view him as their greatest defense against "all things of which they should be afraid, or shouldn't trust or should hate", and thus they "roar their approval at their white knight" (Blow 2018). The entertainment industry's recent obsession

[27] The message read: "Keep screwing [with us] and I'm going to make you eat your fucking words you lousy white faggot". However, "[t]he authenticity of the Twitter accounts […] could not be verified" and "[f]our Mexican government officials said they could not say whether the account, as well as several others in the name of some of Guzmán's children that were linked to it, were genuine.'I am told they are apocryphal', said Mexican deputy interior minister Roberto Campa" (Reuters in Washington 2015).

with television series such as *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico*, and *El Chapo* keeps this fire of fear stoked and burning hot.

A perfect storm has gathered that supersedes the limits of the politics of fear as observed in previous American presidencies: the popularity of 'narco telenovelas' in the Spanish-speaking world that has spilled over into the United States. The streaming platforms such as Netflix where viewers can select on demand the opportunity to binge watch episodes of these series on their own, and a president's rhetoric that leverages and exploits the commercial success and popularity of these series. "Trump's polarising oratory has the function of verbal colour-coding, painting an utterly bleak picture of Mexico" (Schubert 2017: 54), all to serve his own political purpose.

Sadly, what is given less emphasis in these shows, and is completely missing from Trump's fear-based rhetoric, are the innocent victims in Colombia and Mexico. As Ana Karina Zatarain, a writer living in Mexico, puts it:

> There is no glamour to murder, no glory in gore. The trafficking systems are less sophisticated than one would imagine, the brains behind the operations less sharp and calculating. For every philanthropic deed by a cartel in a rural town, there are countless people abducted and murdered. Actually, they're not countless. There is an exact number of them, and every day it grows. They're the children of women weeping in the fields, the afterthought in shows like *Narcos* (Zatarain 2019).

The US War on Drugs is nearing the 50-year mark, and many believe it has failed. In fact, in many states and cities, reform-minded district attorneys and prosecutors are being elected who promise to change criminal justice practices and eliminate charges for minor drug possession or abuse, the news of which is documented extensively in *The Appeal* newsletter and website operated by Daniel Nichanian. In November 2019, the US House Judiciary Committee voted for the first time on a bill that would decriminalize marijuana at the federal level: the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act.[28]

Nevertheless, with El Chapo now serving a life sentence after his conviction in 2019, US and Mexican authorities continue to target the heads of large cartels, and the Sinaloa Cartel remains one of Mexico's top crime groups. Unfortunately, these efforts have resulted in fragmented groups that are harder to identify and target, and violence and body counts in Mexico continue to rise.[29] However, the key point here is "in Mexico". Despite Trump's dire

[28] See Gullapalli (2019).

[29] "The Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG are Mexico's strongest criminal groups today. But a series of arrests and killings of important cartel members, in addition to internal disputes, has caused these groups to splinter. New groups have emerged as a result and are forming new alliances with the rivals of the cartels in power, carrying out attacks with the hopes of seizing control over key illicit activities. This has ushered in unprecedented levels of violence.

warnings for the need to build a wall on the US/Mexico border and promise to end what he called "this American carnage" (Trump in Wilson 2017), violent crimes in the United States have been falling for the past 30 years and continue to fall.[30] Trump, nonetheless, insists he will get his wall built to keep out those "bad hombres" south of the border. In a recent interview with *TIME* magazine,[31] Trump stated: "We're building the wall right now […] It is under major construction", and claimed that the reason the number of border crossings is now at a 13-year high is because

> they're trying to come in because the economy is so good […] They're not coming up for asylum. They're coming up for money […] we have an asylum situation that is so ridiculous. We're the only country in the world with the things that we have to do, and the Democrats could easily fix it, but they want open borders ─ which means crimes, it means drugs (Time Staff 2019).

Few give credence to the wall's potential impact for stopping the flow of drugs. Diego Luna who plays cartel kingpin Gallardo in *Narcos: Mexico*, said in an interview with *Variety* that "A wall is not going to stop anything….They've put a succession of drug dealers in jail, and that hasn't stopped anything either because this is […] a corrupt system that has seeped into every level of power on both sides of the border" (Vivarelli 2018).

El Chapo's US trial revealed that in addition to his infamous tunnels, Guzmán's cartel methodically used legal points of entry to bring drugs across the border via automobiles and trucks, boats, planes, trains, and even submarines. He even "filled cans of jalapenos with cocaine, stacked them on the back of commercial tractor-trailers and drove through legal points of entry, no questions asked" (Olson 2019). Even if Trump makes good on his promise to build "a beautiful, big, strong wall", illegal drugs will continue to flow into the United States because, as Hillary Clinton once said, Mexican cartels serve Americans' "insatiable demand for illegal drugs" (Clinton in Gómez Romero 2019). John Kelly, Trump's former chief of staff, admitted

Whereas violence is bad for drug trafficking organizations, smaller groups rely on it to engage in kidnappings, extortion and other crimes. In 2017, Mexico tallied more than 30,000 homicides, more than any other year in the country's history" (Salomón / Asmann 2018).

[30] "Inimai Chettiar, director of the Brennan Center's Justice Program, said Trump's warnings are meant to bolster support for massive overhauls to the nation's immigration system and a renewed focus on the War on Drugs. 'Since day one in office, President Trump and his administration have wrongly pushed the idea of 'American Carnage' and a nationwide crime wave,' Chettiar said. 'They appear to be trying to scare Americans into supporting some of the administration's most controversial policies, from changes to drug prosecutions to aggressive immigration enforcement. But numbers clearly undercut their claims. Crime rates this year [2017] remain near historic lows'" (Chettiar in Wilson 2017).

[31] Trump's interview included *TIME* Editor-in-Chief and CEO Edward Felsenthal, Washington Bureau Chief Massimo Calabresi, Senior White House Correspondent Brian Bennett, and White House Correspondent Tessa Berenson.

that the United States is part of the problem because it is the world's biggest consumer of illegal drugs.[32]

The popularity for series such as *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico* and *El Chapo* already had been well established, but certainly the coincidence of Donald Trump's unexpected 2016 presidential win and his unapologetic turn to mythopoesis to channel his political message of fear exemplify the sort of effects that media scholars have observed and articulated with cultivation theory, social identity theory and the mean world syndrome. Both Reagan and Trump came to the presidency with successful media careers in film and reality television, respectively. Both candidates embraced a maverick image with eerily similar campaign themes: Reagan's ‘"It’s morning again in America", and Trump's "Make America Great Again". And, like the television series examined here, they respectively mocked and challenged the institutions in which we invest our trust: government, the law and journalism.

While Reagan could engage in diplomatic flourishes and stirring optimistic oratory, Trump acts otherwise. Trump, like Pablo Escobar and El Chapo, "pit the gangster ethos, with its (flexible and ultimately totally disposable) codes of honor and (threatened and actual) violence and unapologetic braggadocio and greed against […] governance" (Norton 2016). By instilling fear in US citizens of the "bad hombres" south of the border, "Donald Trump is putting a gold-plated gun on the table and inviting us to pick it up, join him in the streets hunting down our enemies", and "[t]hat gun looks awfully good if you've lost confidence in the system as a whole" (Norton 2016). Whether or not Trump's politics of fear wins him a second term remains to be seen, so the real question is: How many Americans will succumb to this fear and pick up that gun? Unfortunately, the recent mass shooting at an El Paso, Texas Walmart seems to indicate that some people are willing to kill to stop these so-called "invaders".[33] One thing is for certain, Americans still have quite an appetite for 'Narcos' entertainment, because a quick search on Netflix reveals a plethora of Narcos series and dozens of documentaries about drugs to satisfy this apparent hunger.[34]

[32] In 2017, Kelly urged Congress to "get into the business of drug-demand reduction". He said countries south of the United States are saying, "How about stop lecturing us about not doing enough to stop the drug flow; how about you stop the demand, and then the drug flow will go away" (Kelly in Jones 2017).
[33] See Peters et al. (2019).
[34] Current titles include *Pablo Escobar: El Patrón Del Mal* (Moreno / Mora Ortega 2012), *Drug Lords* (Tiley / Welsh 2018), *Alias J.J.*, (Restrepo / Sandoval / Vásquez 2017), and *El cartel de los sapos* (Restrepo / Casilimas 2008), just to name a few.

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