Netflix's Leap: From Political Economy of Distribution to Symbolic Production, The Río Grande Way[i]

El salto de Netflix: de la economía política de la distribución a la producción simbólica, Por los caminos del Río Grande

O salto da Netflix: da economia política da distribuição à produção simbólica, Pelos caminhos do Rio Grande

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Abstract: This paper studies Netflix's algorithm of prediction, recommendation and mediation to promote audiovisual consumption and symbolic mediation of Latino images in global markets. I explore some of the mechanisms used by Netflix for cultural symbolic construction of a global, transnational, Latino discourse. I focus on Netflix's audience engagement through the appropriation of Telenovelas' operating rules for the development of a global transnational community of producers and consumers which reuse the elaborate production and interpretative process of Latino codes, meanings and contents. I argue that Latino culture, through its diverse cultural contacts functioning like a global Rio Grande, serves Netflix as a mechanism of textual production, distribution and consumption that operates through the conflicts between three latino global market geographies.

Keywords:
Netflix, Latino, Latin American Media, Netflix Latin America

Resumen: Este artículo estudia el algoritmo de predicción, recomendación y mediación de Netflix para promover el consumo audiovisual y la mediación simbólica e imágenes de lo latino en los mercados mundiales. Exploro algunos de los mecanismos utilizados por Netflix para la construcción cultural simbólica de un discurso de lo latino, transnacional y global. Me concentro en la participación de la audiencia de Netflix a través de la apropiación de las reglas operativas

de Telenovelas para el desarrollo de una comunidad global transnacional de productores y consumidores que reutilizan la producción elaborada y el proceso interpretativo de códigos, significados y contenidos latinos. Sostengo que lo latino, a través de sus diversos contactos culturales funcionan como un Río Grande global, y proporciona a Netflix unos mecanismos de producción textual, distribución y consumo que operan a través de conflictos entre tres geografías del mercado global de lo latino.

Palabras claves:

Netflix, Latino, Medios de comunicación latinoamericanos, Latinoamérica

Resumo: Este artigo estuda o algoritmo de previsão, recomendação e mediação da Netflix para promover o consumo audiovisual e mediação simbólica e imagens do latim nos mercados mundiais. Exploro alguns dos mecanismos utilizados pela Netflix para a construção cultural simbólica de um discurso do latino, transnacional e global. Focalizo a participação do público da Netflix por meio da apropriação das regras operacionais da Telenovelas para o desenvolvimento de uma comunidade global transnacional de produtores e consumidores que reutilizam a produção elaborada e o processo interpretativo dos códigos, significados e conteúdos latinos. Eu mantenho que o latino, através de seus vários contatos culturais, funciona como um Rio Grande global e fornece à Netflix mecanismos de produção, distribuição e consumo de texto que operam através de conflitos entre três geografias do mercado global latino.

Palavras-chave:

Netflix, Latino, Meios da comunicação da América Latina, América Latina

1. Introduction

As a transnational metaphor, Rio Grande is a global toponymy that names various world geographies, cultural goods and commodities. A community in Canada, rivers in almost every country in North, Central and South America, the Philippines and Spain, companies, music groups, songs, musical compositions and films, and football clubs, the list of Rio Grandes around the world can be extensive. As a global set phrase from Spanish and Portuguese, Rio Grande is a very potent pair of words metaphor that convey the creative power, growth and importance of

cultural contacts as, for example, happens in Latino culture.

This paper studies Netflix's algorithm of prediction, recommendation and mediation to promote audiovisual consumption and symbolic mediation of Latino images in global markets. I explore some of the mechanisms used by Netflix for cultural symbolic construction of a global, transnational, Latino discourse. I focus on Netflix's audience engagement through the appropriation of Telenovelas' operating rules for the development of a global transnational community of producers and consumers which reuse the elaborate production and interpretative process of Latino codes, meanings and contents.

I argue that Latino culture, through its diverse cultural contacts functioning like a global Rio Grande, serves Netflix as a mechanism of textual production, distribution and consumption that operates through the conflicts between three global market geographies. These spaces, being the first two where the intersection of production and distribution takes place, are: 1) the sites where the so-called Latino cultural communities construct, live and interpret themselves, while being situated outside a hegemonic culture; 2) the areas where Latino culture is organized and constructed as an imaginary culture projected around the cultural circulation model of globalization, in its neoliberal sense, of transnational communities of markets and consumers, making Latino culture a repertoire of signs classified as constitutive of some tastes, aesthetics and narratives define by global markets as Latino; and 3) those regions where market and consumer communities build Latino culture as something alien and exotic (Colón Zayas, 2009).

2. Netflix, from distribution to symbolic production

From a semiotics perspective, Latino culture serves Netflix as a mechanism of textual production that operates through the cultural, political and symbolic tensions in the areas or spheres where Latino commodities are consumed. For example, Netflix's First Quarter April 2018 Earnings Letter to Shareholders reports that:

> Our investment in international production continued to increase with big, non-English originals like O Mecanismo (The Mechanism). Loosely inspired by real events and from Narcos creator José Padilha, this drama is tracking to be one of our most viewed originals in Brazil. We are also seeing more examples of non-English content transcending borders. This quarter, *La Casa de Papel* (Money Heist in English language territories), a Spanish language heist thriller, became the most watched non-English series on Netflix ever. (Netflix, 2018)

As a distribution and circulation of audiovisual content company, Netflix was until

recently the object of political economy of communication rather than the subject for semiotic studies. However, this changed when its algorithm for calculating audiences' tastes turned into a knowledge society or cognitive capitalism's algorithms capable of structuring social processes of much of the population. This is carried out through an audiovisual industry whose symbolic production is conducted by way of its global cinema and audiovisual industry.

Beyond the struggle for meanings between the government of Colombia, the city of Madrid and Netflix, around a December 2006 Narcos' billboard in Madrid's Puerta del Sol, the advertisement reinforced Netflix's production of Latino culture's imaginaries. The display was one of Netflix's's global advertising tactics targeted to viewers in a space where two axes of Latino cultural production converge, Madrid as a site where the lives and experiences of thousands of immigrants from Latin America construct a Latino culture but also a location where Latino culture is organized and constructed as an imaginary culture projected around the cultural circulation model of globalization, as can be seen in the transnational Latino music commodities of Alejandro Sanz, David Bisbal, Miguel Bosé or Rosario Flores, among many others.

It is within the above-mentioned Latino market geographies that Netflix provides audiences a corpus of heterogenous Latino discourses which establishes a transnational, transcultural dialogue. Producers and production teams for series where Latino characters are portrayed such as Sense8, The Get Down, Orange is the New Black and One day at a Time operate within the cultural logics where Latino culture is located outside the hegemonic culture, in the case of these four productions, the United States. Meanwhile, production of *Club de Cuervos*, *3%*, *Narcos*, *Ingobernable*, *O Mecanismo* and *La casa de papel* is contained within the logics of a Latino culture as a transnational community targeted to global, transnational markets and consumers. It is worth mentioning that after two seasons, in June 2017, Netflix cancelled *Sense8* and *The Get Down*.

When analyzing the global interaction of a text, Juri Lotman (1996) argues that one must try to understand why and under what conditions, in some cultural situations, a foreign text becomes necessary. Lotman maintains the importance of examining when and under what conditions a "foreign" text is necessary for the creative development of our "own" or that contact with the other "I" is a necessary condition of the development of "my" consciousness (Lotman 1996: 64). Marketwise, Latino culture as a mechanism for a transnational text production became necessary for Netflix in September 2011, when it began streaming its contents through Internet

to Latin America and the Caribbean.

Netflix's creative advancement of a global narrative appeal drew upon foreign narratives for its global success. *Orange Is the New Black* already had developed its narrative using complex Latino and non-whites characters, while *Marco Polo* had broken with some stereotypes in portraying Asians (Cruz 2014). Latino discourse and narratives, which had proven successful for one of the most important global, neoliberal cultural industries, the music industry, turned important for Netflix's development of business strategies through a creative industry for the expansion of their global audiovisual empire. Appeal of Latino narratives and discourses had been a global trend in music industry since the 1990's (Yudice, 2002), followed by the global success of telenovelas narratives. As early as 1994, telenovelas were making headlines around the world, like the one in New York Times' front-page article describing the success of Mexican telenovelas in Russia (Stanley, 1994, p.1). Video Age International, wrote in 2005 on the growth pattern of Telenovelas around the world calling it a mature market. In 2006, BBC News correspondent, Javier Lizarzaburu, reported that:

> This addictive formula has captivated audiences in Africa, Asia and Europe, and telenovela stars are mobbed at airports in Poland, Indonesia, China and the US. Hundreds of millions of people watch telenovelas around the globe, everyday. Some go as far as saying two billion people - a third of the human race- are glued to these programs, on a daily basis. But having been established on the simplest of formulas, they are now expanding their audiences by raising social issues. (Lizarzaburu, 2006)

An example of this pre-Netflix era telenovela success is Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea*. Soon after airing from 1999 through 2001, *Betty, la fea*, became a global Latino, audiovisual narrative, success, being dubbed, subtitled or adapted in over twenty countries around the world.

3. Narcos and Ingobernable, The Rio Grande Way

Netflix appropriated the operating rules of Telenovelas for the development of a global transnational community of producers and consumers which reuse the elaborate production and interpretative process of Latino codes, meanings and contents. August 28, 2015 Netflix began broadcasting *Narcos*, whose success Ted Sarandos, Netflix's CEO, pointed to as superior to that of HBO's *Game of Thrones* series, while presenting it as the model of what constitutes a global series (Gardner, 2015).

Narcos' narrative success is due to a well balance narrative structure that allows audience enjoyment in diverse cultural geographies. Audiences have been pleased and gratified with *Narcos'* narrative in places where Latino communities are constructed, live and interpret themselves, in areas where Latino culture is organized and constructed as an imaginary culture that is projected around the cultural circulation model of globalization, and in regions where market and consumer communities build Latino culture as something alien and exotic, as in Germany where its success has surpassed all other Netflix series, (The Economist, 2017).

Narcos tells the story of Steve Murphy, a United States Drug Enforcement Administration agent, DEA, who travels with his wife and baby to Colombia to fight drug trafficking and drug trafficker Pablo Escobar. Murphy is the story's 1st person narrator through which viewers learn about Escobar and the DEA's exploits and activities in Colombia. Steve Murphy is portrayed as the stereotypical white Anglo-Saxon American with university studies who probably has read Gabriel García Márquez in a literature course and uses magical realism metaphors to describe Pablo Escobar and life in Colombia. The learned psychologically weak narrator, Steve Murphy, and the macho but also psychologically weak drug trafficker, Escobar, are perfect ingredients for Netflix's team of scriptwriters to obtain a global Latino audiovisual story. Filmed in Colombia and staring a Brazilian actor Wagner Moura as Pablo Escobar, a production team of directors and scriptwriters, Chris Brancato, Eric Newman, Carlo Bernard, Doug Miro and José Padilha, develop a Latino narrative where eighty-five percent of the dialogues are in Spanish and fifteen percent in English.

Commenting on Netflix's second global Latino success, *Ingobernable*, launched March 24, 2017, The Economist's reviewer writes the following note.

> Now it seems that media firms are more willing to serve up foreign titles to their audiences. Scandinavian series such as *The Killing* and *Borgen* had British audiences hooked. Then, in 2015, Netflix took a bold step with *Narcos*, a drama about the life and death of Pablo Escobar, a Colombian drug lord. Though the story was told through the voice of an American agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration, most of the dialogue was in Spanish. Audiences in the United States and Latin America alike lapped it up.
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> *Ingobernable* feels more authentically Latin American than *Narcos*. It is shot and produced in Mexico City, by a Mexican firm that has made a string of successful telenovela soap operas. English-speaking audiences may find it a touch melodramatic, at least to begin with: the pilot episode features the first couple having a very impassioned argument as lightning crackles

absurdly in the background. But the plot races along and by the third episode this reviewer was rather enjoying it (The Economist, 2017).

   Ingobernable's entertainment media reviews have been as excellent as *Narco's,* prompting Netflix to confirm the series' second season. This success is due in part to its Telenovela structure. The continuous recurrence to the rhetorical use of analepsis trope or flashbacks structures *Ingobernable's* narrative like a daily broadcast of a Latin American Telenovela. This organizing trope makes audiovisual grammar familiar to audiences in Latin American and in countries with Latino audiences. Besides that, as Benjamin Russell in Americas Quarterly points out: "there is more than enough drama and excitement in *Ingobernable* to go around" (Russell, 2017). Addressing Mexican government war on drugs and internal corruption, the show deals with United States involvement and interest in creating chaos at the heart of Mexican politics through CIA illegal interventions. *Ingobernable* tells the story of Mexican First Lady, Emilia Urquiza, actress Kate del Castillo, falsely accused of murdering during the show's first chapter México's president, Diego Nava. As the action unfolds, strong women characters take over psychologically weak male characters. Evil CIA civil servants are two United States ideologized Puerto Ricans, Pete Velázquez, the president's murderer, and Amanda, who kidnaps María Navas Urquiza, the deceased president and first lady's daughter, and a Mexican – American, Ana Vargas West, the president's lover who revengefully kills Pete, the president's assassin and becomes a first lady ally. These three roles are played respectively by actors Luis Roberto Guzmán, Jeirmarie Osorio and Eréndira Ibarra.

   While Narco's narration continuously resorts to magical realism, *Ingobernable* is filled with intertextual references to previous Latino-Hispanic textual and symbolic constructions. For example, Pete Velázquez is characterized around *West Side Story's* grumble, rumble, rumpus tricksters Puerto Ricans who sings "We said, O.K., no rumpus, no tricks. but just in case they jump us, we're ready to mix", fused with a Bronx raised Puerto Rican womanizer rapper always talking about a "revolú" and looking for his "Mami Chula". Ana Vargas West, Pete's Mami Chula and revengeful killer, reproduces Pedro Almodóvar's scene in the movie *Matador* of a woman killing a man during sex with a pin. Character names also refer to Latino Culture. Those familiar with Salsa music recall Pete Velázquez as one of the most prolific Salsa composers. Ana Vargas-West, who emasculates the US ideologized Puerto Rican CIA civil servant, carries a composite last name, recalling Tex-Mex police in Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, Miguel Vargas,

who flows naturally between the two sides of the US-Mexican border and discovers the ills, wickedness and corruption north of the Río Grande. Even though entertainment media has framed *Ingobernable's* marketing around actress Kate del Castillo's introduction of actor Sean Penn to Mexican drug lord and fugitive Joaquín Guzmán, "El Chapo", the first lady's name, Emilia, brings forward the Mexican Revolution hero, Emiliano Zapata. a leading figure in the Mexican Revolution, the main leader of the peasant revolution in the state of Morelos, and the inspiration of the agrarian movement called Zapatismo.

  La casa de papel, Netflix's most watched non-English series on Netflix until now, retrieves audiences' encyclopedia of recent media characters in series such as *Prison Break*, *Dexter* and *Braking Bad*. It follows *Narcos* and *Ingobernable's* melodramatic excess turning all interiors into paper houses inhabit by characters whose world is crumbling around them. As in *Narcos* and *Ingobernable*, *La casa de papel's* characters are moved by a surplus of melodrama and dwell in a decaying world. Transnational audiences feel gratified with *La casa de papel* as a Latino melodramatic discourse mediates with their symbolic information database of recent media characters.

  The powerful Rio Grande that Latino culture has become for global markets has provided Netflix with an engaged audience around the world. The company has accomplished its portrayal of Latino culture as a global transnational community successfully. *Club de Cuervos*, *3%*, *Narcos*, *Ingobernable*, *O Mecanismo* and *La casa de papel's* successes are contained within the logics of a Latino culture as a transnational community targeted to global, transnational markets and consumers. Netflix reuses Latino multidimensional net of cultural units and global audiences Telenovelas symbolic encyclopedia for Latino transnational commodification through elaborate productions and interpretative process of Latino codes, meanings and contents functioning as a as foreign text necessary for the creative development and whose contact is a necessary condition of their market development

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