Rivalries and Resonances: Aesthetics and Chronotopes in the Digital Sensorium of Netflix´s *Narcos* and *La Casa de Papel*[1]

Rivalidades y Resonancias: Estéticas y Cronotopos en el Sensorium Digital de Narcos y La Casa de Papel de Netflix

Rivalidades e Ressonâncias: Estética e Cronotopos no Sensorium Digital de *Narcos* e *La Casa de Papel* da Netflix

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Abstract: This paper explores the aesthetics and chronotopes in the digital sensorium of Netflix's Narcos and La Casa de Papel. By analyzing the points of convergence and aesthetic correspondences between these two successful Spanish-language series, this study demonstrates how narrative elements resonate with transnational audiences. Utilizing Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes, the analysis identifies the organizing centers of main plot events, such as the encounter, the road, the house, the threshold, biographical time, nature, family, and work. The paper also contextualizes the dynamics of the audiovisual streaming sector, emphasizing the role of cultural practices and textual aesthetics in understanding the connection between audiences and narrative recommendation algorithms. Through this examination, the study aims to demystify the influence of algorithmic structures on audiovisual production and reception.

Keywords:

Narcos, La Casa de Papel, chronotopes, transnational audiences, streaming platforms

Resumen: Este artículo explora las estéticas y los cronotopos en el sensorium digital de Narcos y La Casa de Papel de Netflix. Al analizar los puntos de convergencia y las correspondencias estéticas entre estas dos exitosas series en español, este estudio demuestra cómo los elementos narrativos resuenan con audiencias transnacionales. Utilizando el concepto de cronotopos de Bajtín [Bakhtin], el análisis identifica los centros organizadores de los eventos principales de la

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[1] This translation from a Spanish original was AI-assisted.

trama, como el encuentro, el camino, la casa, el umbral, el tiempo biográfico, la naturaleza, la familia y el trabajo. El artículo también contextualiza las dinámicas del sector de streaming audiovisual, enfatizando el papel de las prácticas culturales y las estéticas textuales para comprender la conexión entre las audiencias y los algoritmos de recomendación narrativa. A través de este examen, el estudio pretende desmitificar la influencia de las estructuras algorítmicas en la producción y recepción audiovisual.

Palabras-clave:

Narcos, La Casa de Papel, cronotopos, audiencias transnacionales, plataformas de streaming

Resumo: Este artigo explora as estéticas e os cronótopos no sensorium digital de Narcos e La Casa de Papel da Netflix. Ao analisar os pontos de convergência e correspondências estéticas entre essas duas séries de língua espanhola de sucesso, este estudo demonstra como os elementos narrativos ressoam com audiências transnacionais. Utilizando o conceito de cronótopos de Bakhtin, a análise identifica os centros organizadores dos principais eventos da trama, como o encontro, a estrada, a casa, o limiar, o tempo biográfico, a natureza, a família e o trabalho. O artigo também contextualiza a dinâmica do setor de streaming audiovisual, enfatizando o papel das práticas culturais e das estéticas textuais para entender a conexão entre audiências e algoritmos de recomendação narrativa. Através deste exame, o estudo visa desmistificar a influência das estruturas algorítmicas na produção e recepção audiovisual.

Palavras-chaves:

Narcos, La Casa de Papel, cronótopos, audiências transnacionais, plataformas de streaming

1. Introduction

As with any title, this one aims to provoke thought. Discussing rivals and rivalries always captures attention. In this context, rivalry and competition serve as catalysts for exploring the sensorium surrounding Ibero-American audiovisual production, marketed across various regions as Latino, Latin American, Spanish, and Brazilian productions in Spanish or Portuguese. This marketing approach reflects a transnational and translocal impetus that defines their territoriality. The global success of the series *Narcos* (Newman et al., 2015-2017), produced in 2015 by

Gaumont International Television for Netflix, triggered a wave of competition among audiovisual production companies in the United States, Latin America, and Spain, leading to an increased production of content for streaming platforms catering to global and transnational audiences and tastes. Major streaming companies such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and HBO Max have established commercial ties with the Ibero-American television sector, including Televisa, Telefe, Caracol, Globo, TVE, Movistar, and Atresmedia. Consequently, there is a vast production, distribution, and consumption of audiovisual streaming content aimed both at transnational Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking communities, primarily located in the United States, Canada, and several European countries, and at audiences within Latin American countries and a global audience increasingly interested in the cultural offerings of this audiovisual sector.

In this work, I explore the aesthetics of textual production that articulate and rearticulate symbolic constructions of cultural spaces defined by categories such as Latino, Latin American, Brazilian, Spanish, and Ibero-American, for the consumption of transnational audiences within the new digital streaming sensorium. By production aesthetics, I specifically refer to the narrative genres that form the core of streaming programming, serving as the organizing center of representative arguments materialized in an audiovisual medium governed by a transnational political economy. My interest lies in demystifying the so-called culture of the algorithm, which promotes the consumption of audiovisual texts via streaming through simulated complexity created by plot combinations and narrative repertoires. However, it is the audiences who ultimately imbue these productions with meaning and appropriate them through their cultural practices and the aesthetics of narrative genres, generating plots, meanings, and senses of complexity within a transnational Ibero-America.

The narrative production in question does not simply respond to algorithmic re-elaboration; rather, its aesthetic formulation reveals the spatial-temporal configuration of a plurality of narrators and audiences, appealing to local, translocal, national, and transnational tastes. I specifically draw on the great chronotopes described by Bakhtin (1989). The organizing centers of the main plot events in the series *Narcos* (Newman et al., 2015-2017) and *La Casa de Papel* (*Money Heist*) (Pina et al., 2017-2021) are the encounter, the road, the house, the threshold, biographical time, nature, family, and work. In the first part of my analysis, I contextualize the dynamics of the audiovisual streaming sector, supporting the development of

its narrative productions with data mining and metrics to establish the extent of temporal and spatial reterritorialization achieved by these narratives. In the second part, I analyze the first minutes of the first episode of the first season of *Narcos* (Newman et al., 2015-2017) and *La Casa de Papel* (Pina et al., 2017-2021) as narrative spaces where Bakhtin's (1989) great chronotopes are condensed. Beyond a system of audience prediction based on data mining, my aim is to demonstrate that it is the masterful articulation of these chronotopes, which have historically served to tell stories, that establishes the dialogue between producers, actors, and the audience.

2. Business Contexts of Global Audiovisual Streaming Narratives

Despite the expansion and commercial ties of the Ibero-American audiovisual sector in Spanish and Portuguese, a headline in The New York Times on April 20, 2022, titled "Netflix's Stumble Could Be a Warning Sign for Streaming Industry," highlighted emerging issues within the streaming industry, particularly those following Netflix's industrial model. The article presents Netflix's official stance, attributing subscriber loss to structural issues that can be addressed by refining subscriber acquisition strategies and improving the monitoring of user access and password sharing. However, it remains uncertain whether the extensive audience data held by companies like Netflix will be sufficient to develop effective strategies for attracting viewers to their narrative content.

Sergio del Molino (2022), a novelist and columnist for the Spanish newspaper *El País*, commented on April 24, 2022: "Among the many causes of Netflix's crisis, both television and financial, I highlight the saturation of cloned trash. [...] Netflix has codified genres so much that it almost denies the concept of an author" (p. 59). Del Molino (2022) compares Netflix's production, distribution, and consumption processes to the old kolkhoz, the cooperative agricultural system implemented in 1932 by the former Soviet Union. He states: "Netflix is a digital kolkhoz where directors strive to meet their production quota" (p. 59) [2]. Del Molino's (2022) critique of Netflix's production schemes, and by extension much of the audiovisual streaming sector, depicts a system reminiscent of the neoclassical faith of the 17th and 18th

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[2] It should be noted that the title of Sergio del Molino's column in the paper edition of the newspaper El País is "Netflix" while in the digital edition the title is "Netflix communism."

centuries, which was based on a rational need for genres (Wellek & Warren, 1974) and is now rooted in algorithmic rationality.

3. Traveling Narratives: *Narcos* and *La Casa de Papel*

I analyze the points of convergence and numerous aesthetic correspondences between the two most successful Spanish-language series streamed on Netflix. *Narcos* (Newman et al., 2015-2017), produced by Gaumont International Television in the United States, and *La Casa de Papel* (Pina et al., 2017-2021), initially a project by Vancouver Media for Atresmedia's Antena 3 in Spain, and later for Netflix, both exhibit a well-balanced narrative structure that appeals to audiences across various cultural geographies. By examining the convergence and correspondences between these series, I aim to demonstrate the unity of narrative elements that generate plots resonating with audiences in diverse cultural spaces, reflecting the varied temporalities of Ibero-American complexities in a transnational context.

Drawing on Bakhtin's (1989) concept of chronotopes, I identify the organizing centers of the main plot events in *Narcos* (Newman et al., 2015-2017) and *La Casa de Papel* (Pina et al., 2017-2021): the encounter, the road, the house, the threshold, biographical time, nature, family, and work. These chronotopes form part of the narrative and discursive knots that have been global trends in the Latin music industry since the 1990s (Yúdice, 2002), and are echoed in the first global success of Latin American audiovisual narrative in the 21st century, the Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea,* broadcast between 1999-2001 and dubbed, subtitled, or adapted in more than twenty countries worldwide.

The importance of the chronotope in understanding the relationship between narratives and audiences lies in its ability, as Bakhtin (1989) demonstrates, to interweave and unravel the narrative knots of every story. The chronotope plays a primary role in plot development. According to Bakhtin (1989), in the chronotope, time and space are fused into meaningful configurations where narrative events unfold and characters develop, thereby establishing a dynamic framework that shapes the narrative's structure and its reception by audiences.

> [...] Time acquires a concrete sensory character; in the chronotope, narrative events are concretized, acquire body, and come to life. An event can be narrated and informed; exact indications about the place and time of its realization can be given. But the event does not become an image. The chronotope offers the main field for representing events in images. That is possible precisely due to the special concentration and concreteness of the signs of

time—of human lifetime, historical time—in certain space sectors. That is exactly what creates the possibility of constructing the image of events in the chronotope (around the chronotope). (pp. 400-401)

Bakhtin (1989) notes that the representation of the chronotope is concentrated and condensed in a few key scenes, which, in turn, concretize the informative aspect of the narration. All abstract elements of a narrative—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analysis of causes and effects, etc.—tend towards the chronotope and gain substance and vitality through it, becoming imbued with artistic expressiveness (p. 401). While in the novel, it is the written language that encapsulates the images of the chronotope, in film, it is the visual image itself that harbors the chronotope of all audiovisual representation. This image sometimes stands alone and sometimes relies on the linguistic register of the characters, which, as Barthes (1976) has shown, functions as anchorage or relay.

One might question the significance of the chronotope, and the narratives produced for global audiences by companies dedicated to streaming audiovisual platforms. Chronotopes can be incorporated into one another, coexist, combine, succeed, be compared, confronted, or complexly interrelated within a broadly dialogic relationship that extends beyond the realm of narration into the intricate worlds of production and audiences, each with their own chronotopic dimensions (Bakhtin, 1989, pp. 402-403). An illustration of this inherent dialogism is the Korean adaptation of *La Casa de Papel*, *Money Heist: Korea – Joint Economic Area*, which Netflix aired in two parts in 2022. Similarly, this dialogic relationship connects the narratives of *Narcos* and *La Casa de Papel*, which are embedded in stories rooted in the Ibero-American cultural and linguistic milieu, thereby engaging an increasingly transnational global audience.

The histories and worlds depicted in both series are conveyed through the perspectives of narrators Steve Murphy in *Narcos* and Tokyo in *La Casa de Papel*, whose actions reflect a detachment from social conventions and surrounding events. This indifference, which drives the narratives in both series, acts as a catalyst for subsequent events. The initial scenes of both series encapsulate the chronotopes that, over several seasons (three in *Narcos* and five in *La Casa de Papel*), shape the dialogue between the world of production, the actors, and the audiences: the encounter, the journey, the home, the threshold, biographical time, nature, family, and work. Both series begin with a graphic indication, situating the viewer in biographical time.

| Narcos | La casa de papel |
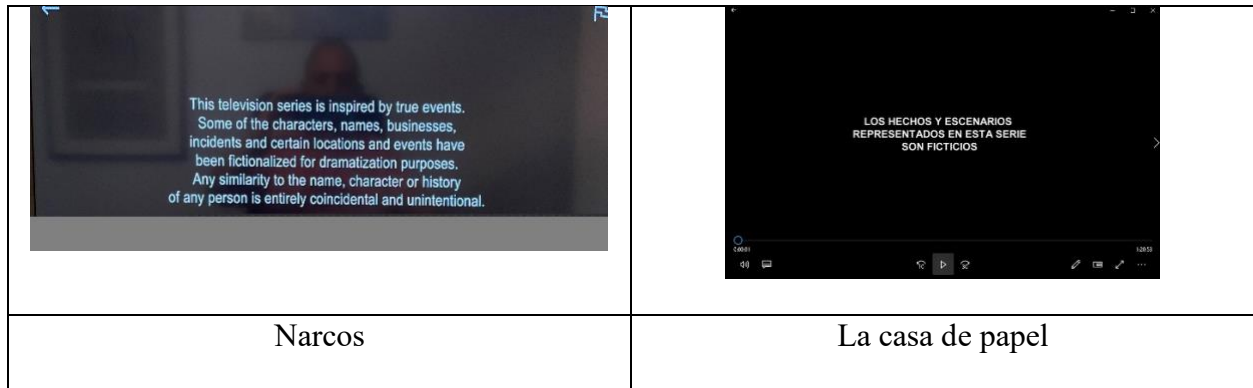
Image 1. Graphic indication of the biographical time of the series. Source: Newman et al. (2015-2017); Pina et al. (2017-2021).

4. Narcos - La Casa de Papel

Murphy and Tokyo narrate the trials they undergo during the events they wish to share with the audience from a perspective of glorification and apology, leading to self-glorification and self-justification. Utilizing this rhetorical approach, Steve Murphy establishes a temporal distance from the events he narrates. He begins his autobiographical account, which links him to the character of Pablo Escobar, by informing the viewer that:

> Today, the U.S. government can listen to everything you say. They know where you are, who you are talking to, and, believe me, even who you are screwing. Turn on a cell phone or a computer, and you are lost. But in Colombia in 1989, it wasn't that easy. First, there was no Internet. No cell phones. The best was a satellite phone; to locate it, you had to fly over it. Also, the only people who had them were millionaires, landowners, politicians, and luckily for us, the narcos were richer than all of them. (Newman et al., 2015-2017, S1-E1 0:00:35-0:01:28)

The viewer enters Steve Murphy's world after hearing a voice-over reading text that the camera simultaneously displays as a graphic clue, serving a dual function: "Magical realism is defined as what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. There is a reason why magical realism was born in Colombia" (Newman t al., 2015-2017, S1-E1 0:00:27-0:00:42). This text is part of Murphy's biographical diegetic universe and, simultaneously, part of the story's non-diegetic space, as it is inscribed in the cinematographic genre of the documentary.

La Casa de Papel begins in a similar manner, employing the same autobiographical rhetorical technique to establish Tokyo as the narrator of the facts and events that connect her to the exploits and biography of The Professor.

> My name is Tokyo. But when I started this story, my name wasn't that. This was me. And this was the love of my life. The last time I saw him, I left him in a pool of blood with his eyes open. We did 15 clean heists, but mixing love and work never works. So when the guard shot, I had to change my profession. From thief to murderer. And that's how I started running. In a way, I was dead too. Or almost dead. (Already on the street) I had been hiding for 11 days, and my photo was plastered in police stations all over Spain. I'd get 30 years. And honestly, I'm not one to grow old in a cell. I'm more into running away. In body and soul. And if I can't take my body, at least my soul should escape. [Phone conversation with mom...] I was out of time, and there were important things I had to do. Actually, only one. And that day, the day I was heading to the slaughterhouse, my guardian angel appeared. But one can never be sure what a guardian angel looks like. And what you least expect is that he shows up in a '92 Seat Ibiza. And that's how I met the Professor, pointing a gun at his balls. [...] The good thing about relationships is that one ends up forgetting how they started. (Pina et al., 2017-2021, S1-E1 0:00:08-0:05:28)

5. Conclusion

Narcos, the series that Netflix used to expand its streaming offerings to a global market, and *La Casa de Papel*, Netflix's most-watched foreign series in 2018 (Paiella, 2021), form part of the cultural encyclopedia of audiences inscribed within the great chronotopes that have historically animated narratives. Through the articulation of these chronotopes, the interiors of fragmented worlds inhabited by characters in turmoil are depicted. Transnational audiences share these territories and habitats of disorder and disintegration.

In conclusion, it is through the examination of cultural practices and the aesthetics of audiovisual production and reception that the connection between audiences and the spatial-temporal logic of narrative recommendation algorithms can begin to be demystified. Approaching this topic from the perspective of audiovisual consumption practices and textual production aesthetics provides an alternative space for discussion beyond the typical analysis of cognitive processes and symbolic construction driven by the algorithmic structure of metadata systems. It is essential to explore the cultural practices of audiovisual consumption and aesthetics

to comprehend the processes that shape the behaviors of new consumers and their habits on contemporary audiovisual platforms. It is crucial to reiterate that it is through cultural practices and textual aesthetics that audiences provide meaning and appropriate audiovisual streaming production or any other contemporary audiovisual text.

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