Narcomedia: Latinidad, Popular Culture, and America's War on Drugs

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Jason Ruiz's *Narcomedia: Latinidad, Popular Culture, and America's War on Drugs* is an excellent, timely study of the ways in which popular media formats –primarily film and television– portray Latino subjects as purveyors of drugs that weaken the social fabric of the United States. Using "latinidad" as a category that includes both Latinos in the United States and Latin Americans more broadly, Ruiz's study examines in multiple instances the ways in which white characters are frequently represented as playing the foil to Latino evildoers. Yet, Ruiz is careful to not interpret univocally white victimhood. Rather, the author persuasively displays how narco narratives can serve as contact zones among different cultures and ethnicities, even when the standard roles of, alternately, white victims and white saviors, largely maintain their historical continuity.

Narcomedia, as Ruiz defines the term, is a "category for critical analysis" –including telenovelas, prestige television, memoirs, film, memes, etc.– as opposed to "a unified cultural or artistic movement" (3). Moreover, Ruiz understands "narcomedia texts as weapons in shaping public opinion about the War on Drugs and those implicated in the drug trade" (3). Inasmuch as narcomedia can influence social perception, Ruiz is interested in exploring the ways in which the stereotyping of Latinx characters feeds a general conceptualization of latinidad, especially within the US media ecosystem. Indeed, while Ruiz's analyses consistently reach across borders into Mexico and Colombia, his study primarily is focused upon "US-made texts that narrate the drug trade and the War on Drugs in relation to Latinos and latinidad" (9).

The first chapter of *Narcomedia* analyzes Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (1983), and the cultural politics that enveloped the film throughout its production. In this chapter Ruiz

establishes a baseline for the representation of the Latino narco kingpin in Al Pacino's portrayal of Tony Montoya, noting how the film itself is a reimagining of a 1932 film by the same name in which Italian immigrants filled the role of the chief "bad guys" in a social milieu transfixed by the exploits of Al Capone. A strength of this chapter is the examination of the ways in which key figures in the Cuban community in Miami reacted negatively to the filming of *Scarface* and its portrayal of a malevolent Cuban narco, driving the picture to be largely filmed far from the imagined Miami in which the story takes place. Ruiz notes how popular media had fixated on Miami as a drug-stricken backwater contemporary to De Palma's film, all of which gets a makeover in the television series *Miami Vice* (1984-90), examined in the following chapter of the volume. Here, Ruiz analyzes how the pastel-hued television series introduced viewers to a sexy and glamorous Miami, albeit a city still plagued by Black and Latino evildoers. Cubans and Colombians continue to be the criminals that besiege the city, combated by Detectives Sonny Crocket and Rico Tubbs. Ruiz's study then examines how Latino and Black characters generally take a backseat to Crocket as the white character is consistently placed at the center of the narrative and tasked with thwarting a host of non-white peddlers of vice.

The third chapter of *Narcomedia* turns to a culminating moment in many narco narratives: the death of the kingpin. Ruiz examines how the representations of Pablo Escobar's death continue to proliferate, and how death functions in narcomedia narratives to "maintain the social order by always putting the villains in their places" (77). In examining the televised series *El patrón del mal* (2012) and Netflix's *Narcos* (2015-17), Ruiz delves into the historical facts surrounding the gruesome images of Pablo Escobar's bullet-riddled cadaver on a Medellín rooftop, and the conscious projection of a US hero in the figure of DEA agent Steve Murphy. In chapter four, perhaps the most exciting analysis of this innovative study, Ruiz examines the figure of the queer narco to question what forms of agency are imagined in *Narco*'s depiction of Pacho Herrera, *Breaking Bad*'s (2008-13) Gustavo Fring, or filmic renderings of Griselda Blanco (whose own Netflix series, *Griselda*, debuted shortly after the publication of this volume). In challenging the hyper-masculine, violent paradigm of narco culture, the narratives of these characters "demand to be seen in environments that try to make them invisible," but at the same time, none of them "challenges the bigger systems of violence and oppression in which they operate" (122-23). The fifth chapter of Ruiz's study is dedicated to the analysis of *Breaking Bad*, in which Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a high school teacher come methamphetamine producer, expands his power by prevailing over a host of borderland drug distributors in a series of conflicts that highlight the schism in the representation of white and Latino characters. In this region, Ruiz notes that the city of Albuquerque in which much of the story takes place is portrayed "as a multicultural city with a vibrant border culture, [while] it also replays long-held visions of Latinos and latinidad as inherently threatening to the body politic of that city" (132). Accordingly, while the antihero Walter White ultimately dies in saving his associate Jessie Pinkman (Aaron Paul) from a brutal crew of neo-Nazis, he "maintains an air of nobility and even grandeur," a status and mode of representation that is denied to Latino characters throughout the series (143).

Chapter six of Ruiz's study takes a long view of the representation of Latino characters in US film from the silent era up to present-day to then focus on two works that showcase

drug culture in the United States and along the US/Mexico border: Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000) and the prestige television series *Weeds* (2005-12). Ruiz analyzes the ways in which Soderbergh's film focuses primarily on white victimhood and the association of Black and Latino characters with drug trafficking. Indeed, the most positively represented Latino figure in the film, Benicio del Toro as a Mexican cop who fights corruption, is only positive because he is aligned with the US-centered War on Drugs. As Ruiz demonstrates, *Weeds* follows a similar plotline in that the story's white female antihero is the central focus of the show as a marijuana dealer, only to become a victim through her romance with a Mexican narco. In both stories, life beyond the southern border is offered as foreboding, perhaps unwittingly justifying Trumpian rhetoric that demonizes Mexicans and Hispanic immigrants. The final chapter of Ruiz's study returns to the Netflix series *Narcos*, as well as the legacy of Pablo Escobar in Colombia, the United States, and across the globe. Ruiz's analysis balances Netflix's artistic liberties in representing the kingpin against the actual aspirations of the historical figure, especially in the political realm, and the ravages that one man's ambitions wrought upon Colombian society. Astutely, Ruiz concludes "For media makers in the United States, Escobar transformed from drug war villain to sexy, edgy filmic and televisual antihero. For many Colombians, this is an act of historical amnesia that must be corrected" (194).

Taken together, the analyses that make up *Narcomedia* provide a panoramic view of some of the most important fictional narratives that drive social understanding of the ongoing War on Drugs, and the Latino figures –both real and imagined– that are associated with that socio-political process. Ruiz does not propose a simplistic mode of confronting the problematics of narcomedia, nor a naïve celebration of narco excess. Rather Ruiz's insightful study places the reader at the crossroads among fictional narrative, historical source material, and the real-life ramifications for those populations depicted in socially grounded fiction.