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US MEDIA HEGEMONY: THE CREATION AND NORMALIZATION OF LATIN AMERICAN STEREOTYPES

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ABSTRACT

Entertainment media content is a powerful ideological device that naturalizes historical power imbalances between the Global North and South. In this article, we explore how the United States has historically used its entertainment industry to manufacture and normalize a global regime of truth regarding Latin American identity, effectively rationalizing geopolitical subordination. Through an interpretative textual analysis, we contrast 1940s' Disney animations *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*, with contemporary geopolitical thrillers like *Traffic*, *Sicario*, and *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*. Our analysis reveals a discursive shift from the condescending exoticization of Latin Americans as simple, cheerful, and rural *others* during the Good Neighbor era to the contemporary depiction of the region as a chaotic, lawless place. Despite their differences, both eras of *hollywoodization* operate as ideological tools of cultural hegemony. We argue that these shifting representations act as a form of border Orientalism and that these narratives strip Latin American societies of their complexity and political agency, constructing a manufactured hyperreality that continuously justifies American neo-colonial interventionism.

Keywords: Cultural hegemony, Latin American stereotypes, media representation, neo-colonialism, orientalism

Hegemonía mediática estadounidense: la creación y normalización de los estereotipos latinoamericanos

RESUMEN

Los contenidos de los medios de entretenimiento constituyen un poderoso mecanismo ideológico que naturaliza los desequilibrios de poder históricos entre el Norte y el Sur globales. En este artículo, exploramos cómo Estados Unidos ha utilizado históricamente su industria del entretenimiento para fabricar y normalizar un régimen de verdad global sobre la identidad latinoamericana, justificando la subordinación geopolítica de la región. Mediante un análisis textual interpretativo, contrastamos las películas de animación de Disney de la década de 1940 —*Saludos Amigos* y *Los tres caballeros*— con thrillers geopolíticos contemporáneos como *Traffic*, *Sicario* y *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*. Nuestro análisis revela un cambio discursivo: se ha pasado de la exotización condescendiente de los latinoamericanos —presentados como seres simples, alegres y rurales durante la era de la Política del buen vecino— a la representación contemporánea de la región como un lugar caótico y carente de ley. A pesar de sus diferencias, ambas etapas de *hollywoodización* operan como herramientas ideológicas de hegemonía cultural. Sostenemos que estas representaciones cambiantes constituyen una forma de *orientalismo fronterizo* y que tales narrativas despojan a las sociedades latinoamericanas de su complejidad y agencia política, construyendo una hiperrealidad fabricada que justifica continuamente el intervencionismo neocolonial estadounidense.

Palabras clave: hegemonía cultural, estereotipos latinoamericanos, representación mediática, neocolonialismo, orientalismo.

Introduction

Media products are socio-political devices that sculpt audiences, naturalizing structural power imbalances. During the twentieth century, the United States consolidated its position as the hegemonic producer of global entertainment; through its film and television industries, it established dominant ideological paradigms around the world and shaped social imaginaries about American society as well as other cultures. In contemporary US media, the representation of the 'Others' continues to reproduce cross-border inequalities that justify and reinforce the subordination of Latin America within the global collective imaginary.

Regarding Latin America, since the 1940s with the policy of the Good Neighbor, the propagation of reiterative narratives and curated representations has established a regime of truth that naturalized two dominant stereotypes responding to the geopolitical needs of the United States. One of them, established in the 1940s and still present implicitly or explicitly in many representations and discourses, is the portrayal of Latin American people as exotic and joyful, but also poor and inherently less civilized. In contrast, in the twenty-first century, another dominant stereotype has been established relating many Latin American countries to organized crime, failing states, and unlawful societies.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how American entertainment media have adapted and normalized the *civilized savior* versus the *backward other* discourse regarding Latin America; the aim is to reveal that these representations are ideological tools. This will be

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done by contrasting two early Disney productions – *Saludos Amigos* (Ferguson et al., 1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (Ferguson et al., 1944) – with three twenty-first century productions – *Traffic* (Soderbergh, 2000), *Sicario* (Villeneuve, 2015), and *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* Season 2 (Cuse & Roland, 2019).

The results are problematized to argue that the United States leverages globally distributed entertainment to construct and, subsequently, naturalize imageries and discourses that legitimize its perceived moral, political, or cultural *right* to intervene in Latin America. Consequently, mass entertainment functions as a critical ideological apparatus that rationalizes geopolitical interventionism.

Context

Historically, the relationship between the United States and Latin America has been defined by asymmetrical power dynamics, marked by military interventionism and economic imperialism. This asymmetry was codified in 1823 under the Monroe Doctrine, which laid the ideological groundwork for US hegemony by framing unilateral intervention as a preemptive measure against European influence in the Western Hemisphere. Consequently, the US presence in Latin America became a persistent and coercive force, manifested through both political subjugation and intensive resource extraction: the exploitation of oil and minerals in Mexico by foreign companies; the Platt Amendment in Cuba, which authorized legal interventions while disregarding the country's sovereignty; the occupation of Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic by the U.S. Navy; full control over the Panama Canal; and the exploitation of oil in Venezuela, vanadium and copper in Peru, nitrate and iron in Chile, beef in Uruguay, and coffee in Brazil (Stuart, 1942).

Despite these constant interventions, during the 1930s, most American citizens had not the slightest idea what Latin America was; this lack of knowledge extended to geography, language, culture, and society (Stuart, 1942). Then, in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the policy of the Good Neighbor to counteract the effects of the Great Depression of 1929 and World War II. The collapse of the American market made the Navy's occupation of Latin American territories unsustainable; furthermore, there was a need to develop more profitable and friendly markets in the region. The aim was to exert cultural influence over Latin America to export a specific product: the *American way of life* (Friedman, 2018; Pinto Lima & Do Nascimento E Silva, 2012).

The Office of the Coordination Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) was established in August 1940 to counter the cultural influence of Nazism in Latin America and implement the initiatives of the Good Neighbor Policy. Its core project was to foster cultural exchange with Latin American countries to achieve mutual recognition (Friedman, 2018); but the underlying intention was actually to *impose* the American discourses and ideologies regarding freedom and democracy. During the Cold War era, media representations frequently aligned with the anti-communist imperatives of the American state, portraying Latin America as a vulnerable and unstable battleground susceptible to Soviet influence, thereby justifying covert interventions and the backing of military dictatorships.

In this stage, cinema served as the ideal vehicle for disseminating American ideology across Latin America and for constructing a Pan-American identity within the United States. On one hand, the CIAA was responsible for producing and distributing American films, to establish an American image worthy of emulation. This objective led to the deliberate avoidance of films that portrayed American institutions and society in a negative light; movies showing racial discrimination against Latinos, or depicting Mexican bandits and their expulsion, never reached the regions south of the Rio Bravo. The expansion of distribution networks and the high quality of the films led to increased consumption and a growing preference for them among Latin American audiences; this also contributed to the gradual decline of Latin American film industries.

On the other hand, there is the matter of how Latin America was constructed in the United States. A series of documentary films was produced to portray Latin American people in a favorable light. To achieve this, the Motion Picture Society of the Americas (MPSA) was established within the CIAA. Its core policy was that films should depict what is *authentically* Latin American while showing due respect for each country (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025). To this end, the MPSA required every film or cultural product to meet certain criteria to avoid one-dimensional representations that could offend the neighbors (Avila, 2011).

However, adherence to this protocol was abandoned almost immediately. The United States sought to portray a Latin America that was friendly but, above all, controllable. Introducing American audiences to the people of the rest of the continent through documentaries and fictional movies, including animations, was intended to establish a connection. However, this was not a neutral portrayal; it was shaped by a specific perspective. The United States was projecting its own worldview onto images of Latin America, a worldview still anchored in the Monroe Doctrine. Yet, this reflected world was consumed without critical reflection. This failure to grasp how the image was being manipulated led American, Latin American and global viewers to accept what they saw as reality. Put simply, for audiences in the 1940s and 1950s, the films and documentaries showed the *real* Latin America, fostering myths about the region persisting to this day. The two early films analyzed in the following subsections were part of the strategies associated with the Good Neighbor Policy and the CIAA's investments in Disney studios.

After the end of the Cold War, the United States' media discourse began to change regarding Latin America. The focus of fiction and entertainment media productions transitioned toward the war on drug cartels and the militarization of the southern border. Latin American nations, and particularly Mexico, began to be predominantly depicted through the lens of a permanent state of violence and unlawfulness, poverty, and endemic corruption (Vrignaud, 2026). Then, after 9/11, the southern border of the United States evolved in the American imaginary to become a highly problematic space that reflected American anxieties regarding national security due to the infiltration of the *Others* (aka immigrants).

More recently, there has been a rise of nationalist and populist movements in the United States that have intensified xenophobic rhetoric (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021). In this context, the United States entertainment producers have capitalized on the polarized environment by producing content that either exacerbates the fear of the Latin American threat or returns to the old condescending, sanitized, and traditional versions of Latin culture that makes it harmless (Becerra Soria, 2024; Mandujano-Salazar, 2021, 2025; Mandujano-Salazar & Ramírez-Sánchez, 2020). However, both stereotypes align with the foreign policy objectives and domestic political climate of the United States and support a social imaginary that justifies intervention.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, some of the main concepts to analyze the ideological mechanisms at play in these contemporary media representations will be presented. First, it is foundational to bring Gramsci's (2000) concept of cultural hegemony, which refers to how elites in society maintain control not only by force, but also by establishing their worldview, values, and norms as the cultural standard, as the common sense; this is done through cultural institutions, and the media is one of the most important ones these days. Building on this, Herman and Chomsky (2002), explained that media conglomerates filter information and shape narratives to serve the elite's financial and geopolitical interests; this is what they called *manufacturing consent*. Following these ideas, it can be argued that, when media conglomerates of the United States produce narratives about Latin America, they are not creating *innocent* entertainment; they are actively establishing a discourse that categorizes who is civilized and who is not, thereby legitimizing systemic inequality.

Furthering this critique, Debord (1977) argued that in late-capitalist modern societies, lived experiences have been replaced by representations; this means that historical and present events are consumed as images. This also brings to mind Baudrillard's (2002) concept of the simulacrum, which explains how media representations have displaced reality. In this sense, the stereotypes produced and reproduced by Hollywood – understood as a reference for the United States media industry – have created a hyperreality, replacing the complex realities of other cultures and societies in the social imaginary. Here, Foucault's (1980) notion of regime of truth helps understanding how economic and political elites have established what is considered truth around the world, despite evidence to the contrary.

In the case of American media representations of Latin America, stereotypes have historically operated as cognitive shortcuts, reducing complex social groups to rigid, exaggerated caricatures that justify discriminatory behaviors, microaggressions, and systemic exclusion. Stereotypes are exaggerated beliefs associated with a category; they serve to justify or rationalize certain behaviors regarding that category and its members (Allport, 1954). Furthermore, through a discursive and semiotic process of *iconization*, certain elements are used in media representations to demonstrate the nature or essence of a social group, while facts inconsistent with the dominant ideological framework go unnoticed or unexplained (Irvine & Gal, 2000), thereby reinforcing and perpetuating stereotypes.

Methodology

To examine the pervasive and adaptable nature of the US neo-colonial media framework, this study adopts a qualitative research design. Utilizing interpretive textual analysis, we deconstruct the dominant visual and narrative tropes within a curated sample of global entertainment media portraying Latin America. This approach facilitates a critical unpacking of repetitive media elements, exposing the latent ideological discourses and power dynamics operating beneath the surface of popular narratives.

A purposive sample of two mid-century and three contemporary American entertainment productions was selected. This historical bookending allows us to trace how certain representations and narratives have been established and become dominant for decades. Furthermore, all selected media products are easily accessible through streaming platforms, meaning they have broad potential to shape the global imaginary.

Table 1.
Purposive sample titles

Title	Release year	Producer Corporation
Saludos Amigos	1942	Disney
The Three Caballeros	1944	Disney
Traffic	2000	Bedford Falls, Laura Bickford Productions
Sicario	2015	Black Label Media Thunder Road Pictures
Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan (Season 2)	2019	Amazon Prime Video

Analysis

The early stereotypes: the exotic and non-threatening neighbors

In *Saludos Amigos*, three stories present three different countries and cultures through a mix of documentary and comedy narrative: Perú, Argentina, and Brazil. There is a narrator who seeks to establish the *right* interpretation of what the camera shows. Visually, the movie relies on merging live-action footage and animation. The first story opens in a village on the shores of Lake Titicaca in Peru. The narrator's voice explains the lake's characteristics and the local people's relationship with it. There is a persistent focus on Inca origins, traditions, and folklore; however, the people in the village are never specifically identified. The intention is evident: to link a local ethnic group to a pre-Columbian culture that the viewer is likely to recognize.

Once the focus shifts away from the lake, the scene turns to the local people. Sepia and red tones predominate. The narrator explains that there's always plenty of color and excitement. The image is accompanied by music composed specifically for the sequence to underscore the narrator's words. What is shown is a happy and rural population.

Then, Donald Duck appears, stripped of his signature sailor suit; he is dressed as an explorer, wearing the archetypal hat of archaeologists. The narrator introduces him as a celebrated North American tourist who will allow the audience to see the region through his eyes. This leads into the animated portion of this story; it is no longer a documentary but rather a comedy segment featuring the famous Disney character as the central figure. Yet, a common thread runs through every sequence: the residents display broad smiles or expressions of serenity, while the bright colors reinforce the narrator's portrayal of the town as beautiful, rustic, and cheerful. There is nothing to fear; there is only simple happiness around.

The second story is about Argentina, specifically, Buenos Aires, which is described by the voiceover as the third-largest city in the Western Hemisphere. The camera shifts to a live action shot of the city; European architectural influence is evident in the structures.

While these initial sequences might suggest an intent to showcase a modern Latin America, they serve primarily as a narrative stepping stone to introduce the true reason for the visit to Buenos Aires: the narrator explains that the visitors were captivated by the lure of the Argentine *gaucho*.

The camera shows a group of people on the Pampas. The live-action footage continues to show their attire and accessories. Subsequently, the narrator mentions an invitation to an *asado* as well as the consumption of *mate* and wine. After a social gathering featuring music and dancing, the narrator compares the life of the Argentine *gaucho* with that of the *cowboy*. Following this statement, the live action footage gives way to animation.

The animated sequence shifts location to Texas. The narrator introduces a cowboy-clad Goofy. The intent behind this rhetoric is clear: it seeks to romanticize the cowboy figure, a sentiment rooted in the contrast between the urban and the rural. Crucially, the meaning constructed around cowboy Goofy is then transferred to *gaucho* Goofy. As such, there is no change in meaning, only a transfer. This leads the audience to conceive of the *gaucho* in terms of their own understanding, which was guided by the voiceover toward a dual construction of meaning. Thus, in Barthesian terms (Barthes, 1999), the narrator's voice actualizes the concept of the cowboy and, in doing so, creates that of the *gaucho*. The problem with this transfer is evident: the audience does not gain intercultural knowledge of the *gaucho* but projects their own existing knowledge onto the figure. In this sense, the image of a picturesque, colorful, cheerful, and gentle rural community is once again created.

The third segment is the presentation of Rio de Janeiro. The sequence begins with a wide shot featuring Sugarloaf Mountain in the background; next, it shows Copacabana Beach, followed by a shot of the Christ the Redeemer statue standing tall in the distance. Here, the camera focuses on the local population and touches upon urban life; however, their portrayal follows a specific, deliberate angle. Initially, the camera focuses on a street corner featuring a small cluster of tables and yellow chairs at an open-air café. However, there are no distinctive visual cues that conclusively identify the location as Rio de Janeiro, let alone Brazil; the image is too generic to serve as a representation of Brazilian society. Yet, this may be precisely what the visual and audio narrative aims to achieve: to create a sense of everyday life so generic that it allows for associations between American and Brazilian lifestyles, thereby establishing a non-disruptive basis for mutual understanding among the public. Furthermore, there is no sign or mention of *favelas*; there is no poverty, only a relaxed, happy lifestyle.

Next, the narration introduces the carnival. The camera focuses on a group of people dancing to the rhythm of samba, while the audio highlights their joyful shouts and laughter. The narrator explains that there will be three days and nights of revelry, making comparative references to the spirit of the New Orleans' Mardi Gras festival and the American New Year's Eve celebrations. In other words, the Brazilian celebration is *digested* by the narrator to make it appealing and comprehensible to the American viewer. Following the shots of the city, the narrator introduces the animated character José Carioca (referred to as Joe Carioca), a parrot. This character plays a more significant role in the film *The Three Caballeros*. Nevertheless, in both instances, he embodies the Brazilian cordial man: the lively, easygoing dandy who treats friends with warmth and generosity.

In *The Three Caballeros*, the structure consists of seven small stories. In the first two, the Galapagos Islands and the South Pole are shown in all-animated segments focused on the natural elements and animals of those regions. Then, there is *The Flying Gauchito*, a segment ostensibly meant to represent the pampas of Uruguay and Argentina, echoing imagery stablished in *Saludos amigos,* also overlaying the American cowboy myth onto the South American *gaucho*.

The film shifts to Brazil when Donald opens a gift containing the cigar-smoking parrot José Carioca. Together, they enter a pop-up book to visit Baía (Bahia), introducing a groundbreaking sequence that mixes animation with live-action footage of Brazilian singer Aurora Miranda. Here, the portrayal of Brazil is heavily romanticized and feminized. José Carioca specifically describes Bahia as the land of romance, moonlight, music, and beautiful girls. The coastal city is depicted at sunset using warm tones, thereby establishing a semiotic link between Carioca's verbal description and the visual imagery, reinforced by his singing of a pre-bossa nova song.

In a scene mixing live action and animation, Miranda sings surrounded by men dressed uniformly in ochre-and-brown striped shirts, khaki trousers, and straw hats; everyone is smiling, happy, including the animated Donald and Carioca. This scene is an extension of the carnival atmosphere established in the previous film as a representation of Brazilian culture, depicted as a non-stop, carefree fiesta—a paradise of samba and dancing that ignores any socio-economic reality. Furthermore, there seems to be a whitewashing of Brazilian society; the Afro-Brazilian roots of Bahia's culture and samba are presented through a sanitized, predominantly white lens.

The final and most extended act takes place in Mexico, introduced by the loud, pistol-firing animated rooster Panchito Pistoles. Panchito embodies the stereotype of the wild, hyper-masculine, and happy Mexican. The segment highlights traditions like *posadas, piñatas,* regional *charro* music, and bullfighting; this is presented mostly in animated form and is not contextualized, but presented as a *bomb* of color and stereotyped icons to the audience. Panchito explains to Donald and Carioca the meaning behind the Mexican flag.

Incongruently, the end of this story connects to another with drawings of *ranchos* and small towns, including traditional Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. Live-action images are introduced, combined with animation to show Mexican people in regional traditional clothing dancing diverse traditional dances, but there is no specific identification or explanation about them.

Then, there is a segment that represents Acapulco beaches. It is important to note that, while aerial views of the beach correspond to real Acapulco, the live action scenes that follow were filmed in a set in California. It is in these scenes that a highly problematic, gendered dynamic of the United States-Latin American relations is presented. Donald Duck serves as the proxy for the American tourist, and his behavior devolves into a lust-crazed frenzy as he chases live-action Mexican women across the beaches. The women in these segments have no agency, dialogue, or personal pursuits; they exist merely as exotic scenery and objects of desire for the male American gaze. The movie's last part is a heavy mix of uncontextualized Mexican music and iconic images, like cacti, *sarapes*, and people in regional outfits, all smiling for no apparent reason. This, as in the case of the Brazilian segment, reinforces the idea that Mexican people are happy and carefree.

Saludos Amigos and *The Three Caballeros* are two excellent examples of how imagery is created and manipulated to serve ideology. The CIAA's projects aimed to portray a Latin America worthy of the alliances needed during World War II. Furthermore, the CIAA needed to produce educational materials to fill gaps in the American public's understanding of Latin America. Yet, these societies could not be portrayed as equals, because one does not protect or guide an equal, and the United States aimed to be the leader of the region. Thus,

the representation of Latin America had to be constructed around three scenarios: the rural indigenous, the urban but not advanced *mestizo*, and the always festive, carefree, and welcoming neighbor.

The threatening unruly neighbor and the need for the American savior

While the mid-twentieth century saw the distribution of condescending and exoticizing imagery to construct an old-fashioned, ever-happy, ultimately unthreatening Latin America, contemporary twenty-first-century narratives reveal a discursive shift in which geopolitical thrillers serve as direct ideological conduits for American foreign policy. In these contemporary narratives and representations, the region is systematically reduced to a chaotic and unlawful space that threatens the stability of the civilized world, epitomized by and centered on the United States).

The first product analyzed, *Traffic* (Soderbergh, 2000), is one of the earliest successful examples of the new tropes aiming to construct Latin America, and particularly Mexico, as a decadent *other.* Narratively, the movie uses a polyphonic network style that weaves three different geographical and socio-economic plots to construct an argument.

The movie opens in a notoriously yellow palette with a scene representing the desert south of Tijuana, Mexico. The Mexican plot centers on state police officer Javier Rodriguez, who is trying to catch drug dealers. However, as he confiscates a truck with drugs, he is caught by General Salazar, a Mexican military officer who works for the Juárez Cartel. Then, the camera moves to a very blue palette to show a courtroom in Ohio, where a federal judge, Robert Wakefield, newly appointed to be in charge of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, has his last case before moving to Washington. The third plot is introduced after that, showing San Diego, California, in a more natural light, as Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents chase down Eduardo Ruiz, a drug dealer who works for Carlos Ayala, the most prominent dealer from the Tijuana cartel in the United States. The movie goes back to Ohio, again in blue tones, where the teenage daughter of Wakefield is shown in their wealthy mansion, consuming drugs with her boyfriend. Then, the camera goes to a wealthy club outside San Diego, and shown in vivid colors, a pregnant Helena Ayala – wife of Carlos – is introduced, enjoying a meal with other wealthy-looking women.

After the plots and main characters are introduced, the movie continues this process of going from plot to plot and showing scenes in distinctive color palettes to advance each story. The narrative argues that in a hyper-militarized border zone, represented by Tijuana, the distinction between the state and the cartels dissolves. Javier cannot defeat the cartels; he can only leverage one against the other to carve out a tiny space for symbolic personal dignity by securing a neighborhood baseball field. While he is presented as the most sympathetic protagonist, the movie structurally establishes Mexico as an unredeemable space of endemic corruption where the only viable solution is for the few *good* people there to betray their own sovereign institutions and feed intelligence to the United States. Wakefield's storyline serves to deconstruct the domestic theater of the drug war by collapsing the boundary between the public sphere of policy and the private sphere of the home. Wakefield is in charge of executing an armed strategy against Mexico's cartels, only to discover that his daughter is addicted to the same drugs he is trying to eradicate from American soil. And, as Carlos is arrested and his assets confiscated, Helena transforms from a housewife into a ruthless dealer who works with the Tijuana cartel. Her narrative arc demonstrates how seamlessly narco-capital is integrated into American society; her becoming a *drug lord* is portrayed as a rational decision to maintain her class status and protect her young son.

Although these three stories are linked—the drugs moved by Javier's corrupt superiors are sold by Helena and her husband and consumed by Wakefield's daughter—the protagonists never meet. This structure presents the main idea behind the movie: the systems of supply and consumption of drugs, and law enforcement exist in a self-perpetuating loop because the characters cannot see the complete network. By concluding without a clear resolution, the movie leaves the audience with the idea that the militarized intervention into Mexico is the only way to manage the drug problem and minimize its bad effects in the United States, while the contradictions of American demand and capitalist complicity remain.

The director's use of a very evident monochromatic yellow/ochre filter whenever the scene showed Mexico, pathologized the geographic space. Here, it is important to consider that the scenes representing Tijuana and the Mexican desert were filmed in Arizona and New Mexico; therefore, there was a conscious construction of an imagery of Mexico. While the scenes representing Washington or Ohio had very cool, institutional blues that evoked law, order, bureaucracy, and the ones in San Diego used vivid colors, the yellow palette evoked dust, dirt, and everything old, indicating to the audience that Mexico is unhygienic, pre-modern, and decadent.

On the other hand, *Sicario* (Villeneuve, 2015) is another good example of the hyper-violent and nihilistic depiction of the United States-Mexico border. The movie opens with a sequence set in a very small town in Arizona, where FBI agent Kate Macer and her team find more than thirty-five decomposing corpses inside the walls of what seems to be a security house of the Mexican drug cartel of Sonora. Although not as evident as in *Traffic,* there is a use of pale yellowish colors throughout the scenes that are related to crimes; also, scenes of the desert dominate those first minutes until the camera moves to the office of the United States Department of Homeland Security, where the palette turns to a vivid blue. There, Kate and her team partner, Reggie, wait outside the glass doors of a meeting room where seven men, representatives of different government agencies, decide that Kate will be part of a multiagency operation led by Matt Graver against the cartel of Sonora. Graver is a CIA agent, but Kate doesn't know this until much later.

The camera then shows a short sequence that is set in Nogales, Mexico, focusing on the house and family of a local policeman, Silvio. The house and neighborhood are extremely poor-looking, with damaged houses built on dusty terrains that don't even have clear roads. Silvio is sleeping on a bed, and his prepubescent son wakes him up, telling him that they have to go to a football game. The boy is shown through a broken window of the house, playing football, with a white Catholic church in the background.

The camera goes back to Kate, who joins Graver and another man, Alejandro, who is introduced as a consultant on cartels. They go to Texas, where they are joined by numerous men from different agencies as they all review the plan. Kate, the only woman in the team, is mostly kept in the dark about everything. She thinks that they will go to El Paso, but it turns out that they go to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, with the intention of extracting the brother of the Sonora cartel's boss.

During the sequence in Ciudad Juárez, there are very significant visual elements. While the first scene shows an aerial view of very orderly streets and housing in El Paso, it then moves to show the desolate desert, representing the Mexican side. As the camera goes back to the convoy, Alejandro announces, "There she is, the Beast, Juárez". The camera follows the convoy, focusing alternately on the

streets and the face of Kate as she looks outside the window with a mix of surprise and horror. The streets that are supposed to be Ciudad Juárez show old-looking, poor houses, streets in bad shape, and decapitated bodies hanging from a bridge, while local people stay on the streets as if nothing happens. These scenes were filmed in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, near Mexico City, and mixed with aerial takes of real Ciudad Juárez.

During the traffic jam set on the Bridge of the Americas – which was filmed in New Mexico – the convoy executes cartel gunmen in plain sight of civilians, narratively justifying this slaughter through the logic of American national defense; Mexico's authority and the civilian people are not even considered. These images dehumanize the local population, reducing Mexican citizens to observers and targets. The city is stripped of its historical, cultural, and economic reality and shown only as a place of war and death.

The climax of the film is when Graver admits to Kate and Reggie that he is from the CIA, Alejandro is from Colombia, and they have no intention of stopping the drug trade; their objective is to *restore order,* by assassinating the head of the Sonora cartel and returning the monopoly to the Colombian cartel of Medellín. Alejandro, moved by personal vengeance, is the instrument of this policy, dispatched to murder the Sonora cartel boss, his wife, and his two children. In that process, Kate, Reggie, Graver, Alejandro, and the rest of the team go back to the United States to find and use a tunnel that takes them to the brother of the cartel boss on the Mexican side. During that move, Alejandro uses and then assassinates Silvio, who was part of the transportation team of the cartel.

The ideological core of the film is explicitly articulated by Alejandro when he tells Kate that she is not a wolf and that the war on drugs is the land of wolves. After successfully finishing the operation, he asks Kate to sign a paper that legitimizes the actions of the CIA inside the United States territory. Although she doesn't want to do it, he threatens her with a gun and leaves with the signed paper. She is incapable of killing him as he leaves.

The last scene shows Silvio's son looking at the empty bed where Silvio used to sleep. Then, he goes with his mom to a dusty football field to play with other children. The sound of gunshots is heard nearby. Everybody looks up, but then children go back to play, and adults also look back at the football field as if nothing had happened.

By framing Mexico as such a savage place where cartel violence has been normalized, the movie establishes the region as a threat to the United States stability and safety. Consequently, the premise is that the only possible response is the deployment of American retributive justice through extrajudicial interventions, and justifies the United States' complicity in the drug trade by portraying its agents as flawed but needed guardians.

Finally, the second season of Amazon Prime's *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* (Cuse & Roland, 2019) is another example of how entertainment media operates as United States' imperial propaganda. In eight episodes, the narrative follows CIA' financial analyst Jack Ryan orchestrating the overthrow of a fictional Venezuelan president. Through an intense episodic narrative, the series transforms Ryan from a desk analyst into a field agent.

The plot kicks off in the first two episodes. During an early scene, Ryan is delivering a presentation in a CIA lecture hall and asks the audience what they consider the most major threat on the world stage. After attendees offer the expected answers — Russia, China, and North Korea — Ryan challenges their perspective by pointing to Venezuela. He explains that the vast reserves of oil and minerals of this country, combined with its political instability and proximity to the United States, make it uniquely vulnerable to exploitation.

Then, Jack travels to Caracas, Venezuela, alongside his mentor and United States Senator Jim Moreno, to investigate suspicious arms shipments linked to the regime of Venezuelan President Nicolás Reyes (echoing the real-life Venezuelan president of the time, Nicolás Maduro, but presented as a right-wing politician). As the American characters move into Caracas, an aerial view of small, clustered houses up a mountain is shown. The convoy is seen going through streets in bad shape, filled with garbage, with poor-looking buildings similar to the imagery used in *Sicario* to show Ciudad Juárez, except that here the color palette is not yellow because Caracas is not in a desert, but in a tropical forest. In this case, filming was not in Caracas, but in Bogotá, Colombia.

Ryan and Senator Moreno arrive at Palacio Miraflores, the head office of the Venezuelan president, to meet with Reyes. This place, as well as the hotel where Ryan and Moreno stay, is luxurious, indicating the economic polarization between elites and common people in Venezuela. On another day, as the convoy of the United States crosses the city, they are ambushed with the help of Filiberto Ramos, the captain of Venezuela's police, who was bribed by a German hitman who killed Moreno. Here, similarly to the role of Silvio in *Sicario*, Ramos is presented as a local official who becomes corrupt due to being in poverty.

The assassination of Moreno marks a turning point for Ryan; his moral compass is destabilized, transforming an official investigation into a personal vendetta. Jack decides to remain on Venezuelan soil, defying direct orders to withdraw, and joins forces with CIA Station Chief Mike November and his colleague James Greer, who arrives after tracking a satellite launched from the South China Sea that is strangely pointed toward the South American jungle.

Then, between the third and fifth episodes, the series presents the argument that modern dictatorships sustain themselves through control of the resource economy, rather than solely through military force. Ryan's team discovers that Reyes is not storing Russian missiles, but rather machinery for the illegal extraction of tantalum, a rare mineral crucial to modern technology that has the potential to disrupt global markets and has been given the colloquial name of *blue gold*. The tension in the series reaches a critical stage in episodes six and seven. Reyes accuses the United States of election interference and forces the total evacuation of the embassy. Jack and November decide to operate outside the official intelligence system. Meanwhile, a special operations unit deployed to the jungle suffers heavy casualties after being compromised.

In the season finale, Jack leads a direct tactical assault on Miraflores Palace to rescue Greer amidst the chaos triggered by a rigged election and massive public protests. The United States-backed opposition candidate, Gloria Bonalde, is framed as a social justice-oriented savior who finally wins the elections and also secures a moral victory when the CIA team in the jungle successfully seizes a political prison camp, rescuing her missing husband alive.

However, the season's ultimate revelation comes when Jack returns to Washington to tie up loose ends. He discovers that the illegal mining network and the funding behind Reyes' regime were not orchestrated by a rival nation, but by United States Senator Chapin. Upon confronting and arresting Chapin, the series leaves the message that the most destructive threats to national security often come from corporate greed and institutional corruption within the United States, but that those corrupted elites instrumentalize structural poverty and corruption of Latin America. Nonetheless, Jack Ryan is the personification of the honorable American savior, that justifies

United States intervention, similar to Kate's role in *Sicario* or Wakefield's role in *Traffic*. *Jack Ryan*'s season 2 functions as a simulacrum where the CIA is portrayed not as an apparatus of historical colonial exploitation, but as an honorable force correcting the inherent failures of Latin American governance.

While *Sicario* and *Traffic* rationalize the militarization of the United States-Mexico border through the lens of the drug-war existentialism, *Jack Ryan* updates the Cold War paradigm for the twenty-first century. By repeating these imageries and narratives, the American media apparatus constructs a deeply negative, homogenized imaginary of Latin America and actively establishes a regime of truth with the underlying premise that the United States has an inherent moral, political, and cultural right to intervene in Latin America. The sepia or yellow filter, the damaged architecture, and the chaotic streets function as semiotic markers of Neo-Orientalism that subliminally signal to the audience an entry into a zone of intense decay and imminent danger.

Conclusions

The entertainment media hegemony of the United States functions as a highly effective ideological apparatus that normalizes international inequalities and rationalizes the geopolitical subordination of Latin America in the global imaginary, also establishing, through stereotypes, a global regime of truth regarding Latin American identity. *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (1944) were entertaining semi-documentaries designed to present a version of Latin America that was exotic, fun, and friendly, but also rural and underdeveloped. On the other hand, contemporary geopolitical thrillers and series reveal a consistent neo-colonial framework in the representation of Latin America, particularly Mexico.

Yet, the exotic condescending stereotypes of the 1940s have not disappeared. In 2017, following criticism regarding the lack of cultural and ethnic diversity in their films, Disney demonstrated that a romanticized portrayal of Mexico could still be a massive success. The animated movie *Coco* (Unkrich et al., 2017) became one of the highest-grossing movies of that year. The story focused on the Mexican holiday *Día de los Muertos* (trans. Day of the Dead) through the eyes of a boy named Miguel and his family. The story is set in a fictional Mexican town, in an undefined historical period that, nonetheless, evokes traditional towns more representative of the early twentieth century than the present day.

The directors said to the press that the movie was a *love letter* to Mexico and its people, arguing that they wanted to represent *authentic* Mexico (Aguilar, 2017). However, contrary to their stated desire to avoid stereotypes, the movie completely ignores contemporary urban Mexico in favor of glorifying and idealizing the rural and pre-modern representations. Implicitly, the discourse was that for Mexico to be a *good* and unthreatening neighbor, it had to return to the past, keep its population in rural settings within tight-knit family units, and remain entertained with mysticism instead of getting involved in contemporary geopolitics (Mandujano-Salazar, 2021).

Thus, the contemporary United States media landscape either exploits a negative imaginary of a lawless, violent wasteland that necessitates American containment or it sells a romanticized, underdeveloped, and mystical imagery that reduces the region to a harmless, traditional, and exotic place. Both approaches, despite their contrasting aesthetic and narrative tones, strip Latin American societies of their complexity and political agency, consolidating a manufactured hyperreality that serves the hegemonic interests of the Global North.

This media treatment of Latin America can be analyzed as an extension of Said's (2002) Orientalism. Just as the West historically constructed the *Orient* as an exotic, irrational, and inferior *Other* to justify European imperialism, Hollywood has built Latin America as an exotic and lawless *Other* that threatens the United States' security. This *border Orientalism* encodes the region's representations with signifiers of dirt, poverty, and violence that distort reality, communicating to the audience that the region is incapable of self-governance, thus, it needs the paternalistic intervention or punitive containment of the American saviors.

This process of *Hollywoodization* actively constructs a hyperreality that replaces genuine cultural understanding. Through the repetition of these semiotic markers, US media institutions cultivate a cognitive confirmation bias among global audiences that convinces them, and also Latin Americans themselves, of the premise of Latin America's inferiority. Consequently, these tropes reproduce a paternalistic imaginary where the United States remains the perpetual, rational savior, and Latin America the chaotic subordinate counterpart. Disrupting this geopolitical hierarchy requires challenging the manufactured regimes of truth that sustain global inequalities, a task that demands a fundamental shift in how Latin America is narrated and represented on the world stage.

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They do not declare conflicts of interest.

Author´s contribution

Autor	Conceptualización	Curacion	Analisis/ Software	Metodologia	Recursos	Supervision/ Validacion	Escritura inicial	Escritura final, revisión
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2	X	X	X				X	

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