

## Imperfect Pasts: Who Narrates the Latin American Past and How is it Represented on Video on Demand Platforms

*Pasados imperfectos: quiénes y cómo narran el pasado latinoamericano en plataformas de Video on Demand*

*Passados imperfeitos: quem e como narra o passado latino-americano em plataformas de Video on Demand*

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From an approach that combines textual analysis and media industry research, this paper examines the role of the expansion of SVOD platforms in shaping narratives about the past in Latin America, through Mexican and Colombian cases. We argue that the emergence of these platforms has led to a decentering of the television production ecosystem. In this context, there has also been an intensive use of the past in streaming fiction, responding to the reorganization of production and consumption beyond national margins. This process articulates fragmented pasts that subvert the grand national narratives characteristic of the broadcasting model.

**KEYWORDS:** Audiovisual fiction, representations, history, transnationalization, Video on Demand.

*A partir de un enfoque que combina el análisis textual y el análisis documental de las industrias de medios, este texto examina el papel de la expansión de las plataformas de SVOD en la construcción de relatos sobre el pasado en Latinoamérica, a través de ejemplos colombianos y mexicanos. Argumentamos que con la irrupción de esas plataformas se ha producido un descentramiento en el ecosistema de la producción televisiva. En este contexto, se ha observado también un uso intensivo del pasado en la ficción en streaming, que responde a la reorganización de la producción y el consumo por fuera de los márgenes de la tradicional televisión nacional, articulando pasados fragmentados que subvierten las grandes historias nacionales, propias del modelo de broadcasting.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Ficción audiovisual, representaciones, historia, transnacionalización, Video on Demand.

*A partir de uma abordagem que combina a análise textual e a análise documental das indústrias de mídia, este texto examina o papel da expansão das plataformas de SVOD na construção de narrativas sobre o passado na América Latina, por meio de exemplos colombianos e mexicanos. Argumentamos que, com o surgimento dessas plataformas, ocorreu um descentramento no ecossistema da produção televisiva. Nesse contexto, observou-se também um uso intensivo do passado na ficção em streaming, que responde à reorganização da produção e do consumo fora dos limites da televisão nacional tradicional, articulando passados fragmentados que subvertem as grandes histórias nacionais, próprias do modelo de radiodifusão.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ficção audiovisual, representações, história, transnacionalização, Video on Demand.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, Latin America's shift toward neoliberalism has driven important transformations in its audiovisual industry. These changes included not only adjustments to financing and production strategies, but, more importantly, a redefinition of the relationship between national States and the audiovisual sector.

The implementation of multinational trade agreements brought legislative reforms that reduced state intervention and fostered greater openness to the global market. Thus, mixed financing schemes began to appear, diminishing the state's dominant role and stimulating participation of private capital in audiovisual production. This model was essential for laying the groundwork for the expansion of OTT platforms and for transforming a media ecosystem that, until 2015 –when Netflix emerged as an agent dedicated not only to distribution but also to original production in the region– was structured around a predominantly national broadcasting logic centered on the television industry.

This transition is evident in Colombia and Mexico. In Colombia, the process began in 1993 with the closure of the Film Promotion Company (Compañía de Fomento Cinematográfico: FOCINE) and was consolidated in 1999 by the creation of the Directorate of Cinematography and the Mixed Film Development Fund (Dirección de Cinematografía y del Fondo Mixto de Desarrollo Cinematográfico: PROIMAGENES). Subsequently, Law 814 of 2003 established tax benefits for domestic investors in film production and created the Film Development Fund (Fondo para el Desarrollo Cinematográfico: FDC), managed by PROIMAGENES –an instrument aimed not only at promoting film but also at enhancing the country's international media image.

In 2008, the Colombian Film Commission (Comisión Fílmica Colombiana) was created to promote the country as an international film production destination through mixed financing schemes that incentivized co-productions. A few years later, in 2012, Law 1556 (known as the Film Law) reinforced the effort to attract international investment,

offering substantial benefits<sup>3</sup> to foreign companies that invested in local productions (Moreno Cano et al., 2021).

In Mexico, the transition began a little earlier, in 1988, with the implementation of the Film Quality Promotion Fund (Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica: FONCINE), similar to Colombia's mixed scheme. Later, in 1992, the Federal Film Law (Ley Federal de Cinematografía) eliminated some protectionist measures, such as censorship and quotas, guaranteeing opportunities for national production (Tah Ayala, 2022). In 2001, the Film Production Investment and Incentive Fund (Fondo de Inversión y Estímulos para la Producción Cinematográfica: FIDECINE) was created, aiming to promote national production through economic incentives and mixed schemes capable of competing in an increasingly globalized market. Subsequently, in 2005, the 2005 Income Tax Law reform was enacted, creating the Film Industry Tax Incentive (Estímulo Fiscal para la Cinematografía: EFICINE).

Taken together, these reforms have enabled the expansion and modernization of the audiovisual industry across the region, fostering the rise of numerous production companies that have provided production services or develop original content for SVOD platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+. As the United States and Europe—the most established markets—become increasingly saturated with content, major platforms have redirected their growth strategies toward emerging regions like Latin America. Between 2020 and 2024, the release of original Spanish- and Portuguese-language content for the region rose by 266 % (Sánchez Pagano, 2025), with most of it produced by companies that emerged in response to these legislative changes. Nonetheless, this trend has contributed to a blurring of national identity, particularly within local television systems, which have struggled to compete in an environment now dominated by transnational platforms.

As Lotz (2020) has pointed out, the most profound indicator of the multinational character of these platforms is precisely the extent to

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<sup>3</sup> Such benefits include the reimbursement of a percentage of expenses for production services and travel allowances, as well as the simplification of bureaucratic procedures and work permits (Moreno Cano et al., 2021).

which their technological capabilities and revenue models enable them to attenuate or diminish the national perspective (p. 11). Following a logic based on the “mobility” of content, they deploy textual strategies and policies that “very directly challenge the concept of programming aimed at both a national audience and reinforcing national identity”, which, since the 1950s, had framed the broadcasting model in Latin America and in most developing countries (Straubhaar et al., 2021, p. 182).

In this context, the past has become an important resource in the region’s content strategies. Many of the series that have been produced and distributed on platforms in Latin America in recent years are part of this same trend, from biopics such as *Luis Miguel: La serie* (Telemundo-Netflix, 2018), westerns like *La cabeza de Joaquín Murrieta* (Dynamo, Prime Video, 2023), dramas such as *Cada minuto cuenta* (Prime Video, 2024), and crime dramas such as *Narcos México* (Netflix, 2018), to name a few.

Beyond their diversity, all these series share a common approach: they focus on the representation of real events, characters, or processes from the past. We do not refer to them as historical because they could hardly be classified as such under the strictest definitions of the genre. However, they all propose representations of the past (or certain segments of the past) and construct meaningful relationships with it (Amaya & Charlois, 2020).

If we accept that, with the rise of SVOD platforms and their localization strategies in the Latin American audiovisual market, the fiction production ecosystem has shifted from national television to transnational streaming; if we also admit that the content from these companies follows a transnational logic that breaks the traditional link between the nation and its audiovisually narrated history; and if, finally, we recognize that, in this context, the past becomes a significant resource to engage audiences, we might ask ourselves: What kinds of stories about the past are being told from these various production enclaves? How do these stories differ from traditional historical fictions linked to the era of television broadcasting and the dominance of large national companies? What narrative strategies structure these stories about the past? And, above all, what national tensions do they raise or fuel?

## METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

To explore these questions further, we developed a two-level analysis strategy for this paper. First, we examined the industrial context by analyzing three Latin American companies –Dynamo, BTF Media, and El Estudio– as exemplary cases that illustrate the decentralization of meaning-making about the past in television fiction. Based on an analysis of press reports and publicly available documents, we outline the main characteristics of these companies, tracing their origins, approaches, financing models, and entry into the audiovisual market through strategic alliances with global platforms, all within the broader context of the Latin American audiovisual market’s opening since the beginning of the century. Since all three companies emerged in similar contexts, closely linked to the rise and growth of digital platforms, we propose that a significant portion of the fiction series produced or co-produced by these companies for SVOD platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video, or Disney+, share a set of features that reveal textual and thematic patterns, particularly the use of the past as a resource for commercial appeal to audiences.

Subsequently, we focused on the textual analysis of a set of five series in which these companies were involved: *Narcos* (2015), *El Chapo* (2017), *Historia de un Crimen: Colosio* (2017), all produced by Dynamo for Netflix; *El Secreto de Selena* (2018), produced by BTF Media, which was distributed first by Disney and later by Netflix; and *¿Quién lo mató?* (2024), produced by El Estudio for Prime Video.

In this phase of the analysis, we began by watching each series in its entirety, after which we purposefully selected specific episodes for closer examination. We analyzed these episodes using a set of pre-defined categories aimed at understanding how these companies connect their fiction production strategies to representations of particular pasts. The categories included: times represented on screen, characters depicted, historical processes highlighted, strategies and resources used to portray the past, and features linked to the textual policies of the SVOD platforms (Jenner, 2018).

With these elements, we identified shared characteristics to develop a regional expansion strategy for SVOD systems by creating common

pasts for the Latin American region. Given that the objective of this work is to observe the relationships between a change in the transnational audiovisual production model and the type of pasts they represent, we will not delve into the specific representations of each series, but rather, we have decided to abstract the elements analyzed through the characteristics observed in order to recognize common patterns in them. Complementing the textual analysis of the series, we also explore some promotional and journalistic paratexts (Gray, 2010) surrounding them, as these construct expectations and frameworks of meaning for their social circulation and emphasize certain values or qualities.<sup>4</sup>

## RESULTS

### *Three exemplary cases*

Following the aforementioned legislative changes, new production companies associated with financial markets emerged. The growth of Netflix and other OTT services in Latin America, with a significant need for local narratives to complement their expansion strategy based on original production, relied on partnerships with these kinds of companies to produce original content and build their own catalogs with the potential for success in distant markets. Dynamo, El Estudio, and BTF Media are examples of production companies that have thrived in the new landscape of audiovisual distribution and consumption, helping us to rethink the links between contextual changes in the audiovisual market and the ways we tell our stories about our existence in the world. This section aims to describe these strategies.

Dynamo was founded in 2006 by financial advisors Andrés Calderón, Diego Ramírez and Cristian Conti, at a time defined by the enactment of Law 814. Drawing on their international experience in finance and their diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, the founders developed a broad vision and a strategic approach to taking advantage of this legislation opportunity. While Dynamo's initial

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<sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the representations in some of these series, please refer to our work on specific productions: Amaya and Charlois (2018, 2019, 2020) and Amaya (2018).

productions –*Perro come perro* and *Noche buena* (both released in 2008)– were deeply rooted in Colombian identity and primarily targeted at the domestic market, the company’s core identity was always oriented toward a transnational approach, which became increasingly prominent as Dynamo evolved.

Between 2006 and 2013, leading up to the implementation of Law 1556, Dynamo built a robust portfolio of co-productions, which accounted for 60 % of its operations. This highlights the company’s adaptability, as it successfully incorporated Law 814 into a business strategy aimed at securing a prominent position in the global market. Through this approach, Dynamo developed a business model that rapidly began to blend narratives and styles tailored to international audiences. The company’s growth was anchored in three core pillars: creating original productions, providing production services to foreign companies, and engaging in co-productions with various countries. This modular strategy enhanced the diversity of its offerings and maximized resource utilization. By adopting production standards modeled after those in the United States, Dynamo pursued the universalization of its content and fostered greater engagement with a stronger production infrastructure.

Dynamo’s growth coincided with the rise of OTT platforms, which gave the company an unparalleled opportunity to access a global audience. In this new landscape, it established agreements with VOD platforms, initially Netflix, allowing it not only to diversify its income sources but also to position its productions in the global audiovisual market. In 2007, it founded Dynamo Capital, a parallel initiative that focused on managing private investment funds in audiovisual production. This optimized the company’s co-production financing capacity and helped facilitate entry into markets that previously presented barriers to the circulation of local content.

As Dynamo consolidated its position in the co-production field, the priority for national content began to fade. Between 2006 and 2017, of the 32 productions developed, only six were explicitly intended for the local market, made during the company’s early stages (Rocha, 2018). Starting in 2013, the year Law 1556 came into effect, the work was based on an outward-looking development strategy. This evolution led to a departure from the original spirit of the regulatory reforms that

sought to promote Colombian cinema, especially Law 814, in favor of a more open vision of participation in the international market.

The international growth strategy led to the opening of offices in key markets, such as Mexico, Spain, and the United States. Given its partnerships with various international production companies and platforms, Dynamo focused on developing narratives that crossed borders, leading to greater investment in stories that not only reflected local reality but also addressed experiences and issues with transnational impact, such as drug trafficking.

In Mexico, BTF Media was founded in 2010 by Ricardo Coeto, a producer with extensive experience in national television stations such as TV Azteca and Televisa, and international stations such as NBC Universal Telemundo, and Francisco Cordero, a manager with a background in entertainment companies and founder of VCR Capital, an investment fund for the audiovisual industry. Since its founding, the company's strategy has been to forge alliances to conquer the Latin American market.

BTF Media's idea has been to create content that resonates with both local and international audiences, so they have gone through different stages of expansion, for example, by purchasing local production companies such as Oriol Uría's Garage Films to become BTF Spain (Redacción AV451, 2017). This allowed the company to take advantage of local talent and Spain's position in the Latin American market, and also to circumvent protectionist European legislation, allowing it to operate as a local producer. On the other hand, various partnerships have also enabled them to undertake projects in Mexico, the United States, Argentina, and Chile (Mezzera, 2023).

Coeto and Cordero saw an opportunity to develop biopics and dramas based on real events, favoring content that connects emotionally with audiences and ties in with their own life stories. In this model, they found a formula for success that took them to portray the lives of Juan Gabriel (*Hasta que te conocí*, 2016, with Disney and Telemundo), Julio César Chávez (*El Cesar*, 2017, with TV Azteca and Space), Diego Maradona (*Maradona: sueño bendito*, 2021, with Prime Video), among others, cementing their reputation in the production of biopics.

Strategic partnerships with major networks and platforms such as Disney+, Televisa, Univision, Prime Video, ViX, and Star+ have been

fundamental not only for financing productions but also for securing distribution channels in international markets. In addition, BTF Media has also forged alliances with local governments to obtain production benefits. In 2023, Francisco Cordero advised the ruling Movimiento Ciudadano party in Jalisco, Mexico, on structuring and presenting reforms to the Organic Law of the Jalisco State Entertainment Agency (*Ley Orgánica de la Agencia Estatal de Entretenimiento de Jalisco*) (Movimiento Ciudadano, 2023), with the aim of creating the new *Filma Jalisco Law (Ley Filma Jalisco)* in the same year.

This proposal establishes ways to public financing to incentivize the audiovisual industry in Jalisco, attract investment in cinema, and promote local talent through patronage and knowledge transfer via co-production projects (Editorial, 2023), largely following the Colombian model.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly before the new legislation came into force, BTF Media announced, together with the then Governor of the state, Enrique Alfaro, a partnership with Spain's Secuoya Studios to create Guadalajara Content City, a production hub inspired by the Madrid Content City model ("BTF Media and Secuoya develop", 2023). In the same year, BTF Media was already taking advantage of the new law's benefits to begin filming the series *Pancho Villa: El Centauro del Norte* (2023) for Star+ in Guadalajara. This demonstrated the influence that the new production companies were beginning to acquire, with the promise of returning the region to an audiovisual production center while expanding the legislative model that had already proven beneficial for the industry growth in other parts of the continent.

In addition to fiscal incentives from local governments, BTF Media consolidated financing models through investment projects in the entertainment industry via VCS Capital, a company founded by

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<sup>5</sup> Following the Colombian model, the Jalisco government began offering a cash rebate model, through which it returns 40% of local audiovisual service expenses and 20% of logistics service expenses to production companies, in addition to calls for venture capital for feature films, the promotion and development of audiovisual works, and the management of permits and locations in the state (Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, 2023).

Francisco Cordero himself, which promises to minimize risk for its investors by studying consumer trends and diversifying project funding.

Another company created in Mexico, within the framework of the transformations of the audiovisual market, is El Estudio, an audiovisual production company founded in 2020 by Pablo Cruz –who co-founded Canana Films with Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna and has extensive experience in film and television production–, Enrique López Lavigne –founder of Apache Films– and Diego Suárez Chialvo –a producer with extensive experience in the international market, having held management positions at Fox Television Studios and Sony Pictures Entertainment. The background and origins of its founders provided El Estudio, from its inception, with a solid network of filmmakers and producers with experience in the international market and the ability to recognize consumer trends in the entertainment industry (“Nace El Estudio”, 2020).

Like Dynamo, El Estudio’s expansion strategy has involved consolidating key locations in Mexico, Los Angeles, and Madrid. The company took advantage of the growing demand for Spanish-language content in an increasingly competitive global landscape and, since its launch, announced an ambitious plan with 63 projects in development or production, through partnerships with major industry companies such as Sony Pictures International Productions, Netflix, HBO, Lionsgate, Viacom International Pictures, Movistar Plus, and Beta Film (Hopewell & De la Fuente, 2020).

Lantica Media, which operated Pinewood Dominican Republic Studios until 2024, provided significant support for El Estudio’s launch strategy. The partnership not only offered access to advanced production infrastructure, but also provided a crucial financing channel for large-scale projects. In addition, working with prominent companies in the sector helped establish a reputation for quality and set up effective distribution channels (Hopewell & De la Fuente, 2020).

El Estudio’s productions covered a wide range of genres, from arthouse cinema to horror and fantasy, as well as documentaries. This allowed the company to appeal to various audiences and niche markets. Some of its most notable productions have been *El Baile de los 41* (2020), *Las Crónicas del Taco* (2019), and *El Caso Cassez-Vallarta*:

*Una Novela Criminal* (2024), which meant a clear intention to diversify its content to remain a relevant player in audiovisual fiction trends.

El Estudio's presence in key hubs of the Ibero-American industry, taking advantage of legal benefits for production, gave the production company a competitive edge by integrating the markets of Latin America, the United States, and Spain. From the outset, the company had financial backing from MediaNet Partners, an investment and asset management firm specializing in the media and entertainment sector in Latin America. The company took advantage of the boom in Spanish-language content to gain attractive investments in the audiovisual sector with public-private investment schemes and tax laws supporting the film industry. This helped minimize risks in an industry that is not very stable in the region, promoting flexibility in narratives and product innovation.

These three cases exemplify a transition in the Latin American audiovisual industry, linked to the entry of a new medium into the regional ecosystem, no longer linked to the national sphere, but to the need for transnational markets for narratives. Taking as our case studies series created by these same companies, we aim to account for how these transformations disrupt the type of meaning proposals available in the audiovisual catalog, especially those linked to the past, as a privileged source of successful stories.

*“Inspired by true events”: What stories about the past are told?*

At first glance, the label “fiction based on true events” seems to be the most appropriate way to group this diverse set of narratives that revisit or rework processes, characters, or events from the past. This is the common claim, both in promotional paratexts and in the opening credits of all these series. “The true story as you’ve never seen it before” was how the first season of *Narcos* was promoted; “Inspired by true events”, said the promotional posters for *¿Quién lo mató?*; and “A story inspired by true events”, which, after 25 years, revives the controversial investigation that marked the chronicle of Mexico, invited the teaser for *Historia de un Crimen: Colosio*.

In all these cases, this label seems to be used to designate a new approach to the past in fiction, one that distances itself from both the conventions and the genre commitments implicit in historical fiction. It is not just a promotional label but also defines a stance regarding the time frame in which the stories are set and the type of stories they represent and update. In temporal terms, it refers to a recent past, an active past, and, therefore, a relatively present past that connects or explains contemporary phenomena or concerns. Furthermore, it refers to another type of story, different from those that had been privileged in television images of “national nature”.

The segments of the past that are interesting for creating “fiction inspired by true events” distance themselves from the great tales of heroes or deeds that would occupy a privileged place in the construction of a model narrative of the nation; instead, they are interested in the smaller, more fragmentary, more scattered stories of their failures, their deviations, their scandals. These are the stories of major criminals, such as El Chapo and Pablo Escobar, and of the most traumatic, enigmatic, or scandalous crimes, like Luis Donaldo Colosio, Selena Quintanilla, and Paco Stanley’s murders. They are, to a large extent, the echo of events with a great media and social impact for which there is still no clear explanation, no socially agreed “historical truth”.

These are stories about inconceivable characters or events, which seem to confirm the premise that “reality surpasses fiction” and which serve to satisfy certain needs for explanation or order: what happened, and how did we get here? These seem to be the underlying questions posed by fiction series such as *Narcos* or *El Chapo* about the harsh reality of drug trafficking and violence in Latin America. What is the truth? ask other series, such as *¿Quién lo mató?*, *Historia de un crimen: Colosio* and *El Secreto de Selena*. These are controversial stories, over which a veil of suspicion remains. Due to their unresolved nature and temporal proximity, these stories have the ability to spark the interest of local audiences familiar with the events, but at the same time, due to their seemingly extraordinary nature, they can also appeal to culturally distant audiences, for whom these events may seem extravagant, almost unreal.

*Certain characters and events are fictional: how is the past told?*

A distinctive feature of these stories is that the label “inspired by true events” is accompanied by narrative strategies that overlap fictional license with journalistic investigation or court records of the events. For example, *El Secreto de Selena* is based on the book of the same name by journalist María Celeste Arrarás (2015), which covers the murder of the singer and the trial of Yolanda Saldívar, as well as the journalistic investigation in the months leading up to the crime. *El Chapo* was promoted as the result of a collaborative effort between Univision’s investigative journalism team and the creative team at Story House (UCI PR Team, 2016).

Others draw on judicial archives; such as *¿Quién lo mató?*, which was presented as a series based on files from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Attorney General’s Office of the Federal District (Procuraduría de Justicia del Distrito Federal) (Vértiz, 2024), or *Historia de un crimen: Colosio*, whose screenwriter Rodrigo Santos claimed to have based his work on extensive research into the assassination, on the report by the Special Prosecutor’s Office, and on various books and newspaper articles on the subject (Santos, as cited in Medina, 2024).

In all these cases, the use of journalistic documentation or court records serves as an indication of the “objective” backing, the “real” basis for the fictional stories. They provide the basis for the story’s credibility, offering audiences familiar with the events the illusion of accessing a veiled truth, of piecing together the scattered and fragmentary information about the protagonists into a coherent and concise narrative. For other audiences, who have no knowledge of the events or characters involved –for whom they might even seem “unreal”– it also serves to reaffirm the veracity of the stories told.

The supposed objectivity (“reality”) of the facts documented in archives and files is also compounded by the narrative license of fiction, thereby blurring or obscuring the boundaries between the two: which events actually occurred and which were fictional creations? The overlap between reality and fiction is not only a narrative strategy, but has also permeated the strategies used to promote some of these series.

For example, in 2019, Netflix filled walls and billboards in Mexico City with one of the most famous phrases in Mexican political history, “I see a Mexico hungry and thirsty for justice”, to promote *Historia de un Crimen: Colosio* (Gutiérrez, 2019). In Guadalajara, around a thousand promotional banners for the series were removed, thinking they could have been placed there for political purposes due to their clear allusion to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) (Bobadilla, 2019).

In terms of storytelling, the intensive use of media archives, particularly television archives, is another strategy that reinforces the realism of these series. They feature recurring sequences from television news programs that report “live” on the events depicted in the fiction: the capture of Joaquín Guzmán Loera in *El Chapo*; the murder of Paco Stanley in *¿Quién lo mató?*, or the shooting at Lomas Taurinas in *Historia de un crimen: Colosio*. In addition to the news sequences, images of print media headlines are also used, serving as emphatic markers and giving a sense of the scope of the events described.

The use of the archive is also intertwined with the remediation of memorable segments or images within media history: Pablo Escobar’s police file or his execution on a rooftop in Medellín in *Narcos*; Luis Donaldo Colosio’s speech at the Monument to the Revolution in *Historia de un crimen: Colosio*; the sequences from Paco Stanley’s last show and his apparent tension with Mario Bezares in *¿Quién lo mató?*, to mention just a few examples. An interesting aspect in this regard also has to do with the remediation of journalistic figures or media spaces: Howard Stern’s program in which, in reference to Selena’s death, he mocks the Latino community by claiming that they have the worst taste in music in *El Secreto de Selena* (ep. 5); the sequences in which Talina Fernández reports to Jacobo Zabludovsky from the hospital in Tijuana in *Historia de un crimen: Colosio* (ep. 2); the repeated use of images from Jacobo Zabludovsky’s news program in *El Chapo*; or the remediation of an interview by Paty Chapoy to Brenda Bezares in *¿Quién lo mató?* (ep. 4). In all these cases, remediation can be understood as a resource for anchoring the plots in time, which, while reinforcing their verisimilitude, also serves as a nod to the media memory of Mexican viewers, who constitute a significant part of the potential audience for these series.

These types of resources, aimed at reinforcing the realism of the series, are combined with melodramatic plots that emphasize personal stories and suffering, encoding the emotions and feelings of the protagonists, their dreams, and frustrations. For example, in *Historia de un crimen: Colosio*, Diana Laura Riojas, the candidate's widow, embodies not only the suffering caused by the loss of her husband and the father of her children, but also the desperate struggle for justice and truth, aware that she has little time left to live. "I don't want to die like this. I don't want to die without knowing the truth", she cries desperately to special prosecutor Montes (ep. 6, min. 35:12 - 35:33).

In *El Secreto de Selena*, María Celeste Arrarás plays a pregnant journalist whose obsession with finding the truth leads her to put herself in danger and face the sacrifice of losing her child, which will help her "understand the pain of Selena's parents" (ep. 7). Yolanda Zaldívar, Selena's murderer, is melodramatically constructed as the opposite of the singer: a sad character, subjected to a life of poverty, abuse, and bullying, who desperately longed to be loved (ep. 3). In *El Chapo*, flashbacks to the childhood and youth of Guzmán Loera's character allow us to understand the circumstances that led him into the world of drug trafficking, humanely portraying the drug lord as a humble peasant, subjected to abuse by his father and willing to do anything to overcome his circumstances.

The deployment of these melodramatic narratives –aimed at mobilizing emotions, activating empathy, and identifying audiences with the characters represented on screen– is fused with strategies aimed at reinforcing the verisimilitude and realism of these stories. In any case, discerning the boundaries between historical truth and fictional constructions is left open to audience interpretation and is, in many cases, clarified in journalistic paratexts.<sup>6</sup> However, as Montanari (2024)

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<sup>6</sup> In recent years, a large number of newspaper articles have been published explaining the "real" historical events and figures depicted in this type of series. These articles function as "paratexts", which aim to orient the reader/viewer by offering "historical" clues to help them understand the fictional narrative of these series and determine the degree of fictionality or adherence to real history. They aim to operate as a "reality marker" for the series (Amaya & Charlois, 2023).

states, it is perhaps precisely the tensions surrounding the “truth status” of this type of story based on true events “that make these genres so powerful, as they prompt the public to question what ‘telling the truth’ really means” (pp. 102-103).

*Grammars of transnationalism: the past, beyond borders*

Another relevant aspect in analytical terms has to do with the adjustment of this type of series to the textual policies of the platforms, which these productions go through in an attempt to enhance their appeal at the regional and even, potentially, global level. As Jenner (2018) has pointed out, “in the context of textual production, the importance of exports to the television economy means that transnational appeal must be encoded in the text” (p. 219). According to the author, this implies that texts circulated globally through these platforms present a “grammar of transnationalism”, understood as a set of particular textual features that facilitate their transit across borders. Jenner identifies some of these textual strategies, such as the use of genres associated with quality television, the use of cinematic aesthetics, and the appeal to a system of universal values.

In general, the textual policies of these platforms are aligned with what is known as “quality television” or “prestigious television” (Buonanno, 2018; Jenner, 2018). In other words, they seek to adhere to certain distinctive criteria, such as originality, experimentation, addressing controversial or cutting-edge issues, narrative and aesthetic complexity, among others (Buonanno, 2018). Like niche channels, these platforms operate on the basis of principles of “distinction” from conventional television.

In this regard, a relevant aspect of this type of fiction, “inspired by true events”, is its labeling in terms of genre. All of them are presented (and coded) in various genres such as crime drama, political thriller, true crime, or biopic. Genre hybridization is one of their fundamental characteristics. For example, *El Secreto de Selena* combines elements of true crime and biopic; *El Chapo* combines features of crime drama and biopic; *Historia de un crimen: Colosio* mixes true crime, political thriller, and biopic.

Although hybridization can be understood in these cases merely as a textual strategy associated with the “narrative complexity” (Mittel, 2015) of quality television, we could also consider that –as Mittel explains (2004)– gender categories arise from the activation and enhancement of certain textual features or components, to the detriment of other possible ones. In other words, genres are constructed and made “visible” through a set of discursive practices. These discursive practices –of the industry, critics, and audiences– not only surround the genre but also constitute and delimit it: they articulate relationships between different texts, link them in certain categories, and associate them with specific cultural assumptions.

In this sense, there is a “practice” of defining genre from the moment these series are labeled as “political thriller” or “crime drama” –and not as “historical drama” or “adventure”, for example– while also activating a set of practices for evaluating their cultural value. Genre definition and hybridization are not only –nor fundamentally– creative strategies, but can also operate as “strategies of cultural legitimation”, which attempt to distance these types of products from other genres traditionally associated with the “past of television”, with the broadcasting era (Newmann & Levine, 2012, p. 29).

We can also understand the use of cinematic aesthetics in these cases, with the participation of personalities from the world of cinema in the direction of these different series: award-winners José Padilha, Andrés Báiz, Gabriel Ripstein, and Gerardo Naranjo in *Narcos*; Ernesto Contreras and J. M. Cravioto in *El Chapo*; and Natalia Beristáin in *El Secreto de Selena* and *Historia de un crimen: Colosio*. The casts include international stars such as Pedro Pascal and Wagner Moura in *Narcos*, but also figures who have proven themselves in previous streaming successes, such as Luis Gerardo Méndez (*Club de Cuervos*), Diego Boneta (*Luis Miguel: la serie*), both starring in *¿Quién lo mató?*, or Ilse Salas (Mr. Ávila) in *Historia de un crimen: Colosio*, to name but a few.

As for appealing to universal values such as those expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, liberal values that may resonate in other cultures –another strategy identified by Jenner (2018)– it should be noted that most of these series focus primarily on the Latin American regional market. This does not imply an adjustment or

rethinking of the moral principles that govern most Western countries, but it does call into question their application in countries in the region. In other words, if we consider that the stories relevant to the series analyzed are precisely the failures, deviations, or major crimes and scandals of countries such as Colombia and Mexico, we could think that they affirm some of these fundamental values by highlighting basic violations of the right to life and peace, or the impossibility of accessing truth and justice. The explanation of horror, the search for truth, and the denunciation of corruption and inefficiency in political and judicial institutions are common denominators in this group of series, which, in their melodramatic backdrop, strive for the restoration of order and the defense of these basic universal values.

In June 2024, Javiera Balmaceda, head of international originals at Amazon Studios for Latin America, stated that true crime continued to be “a home run” on the continent and, to illustrate her point, highlighted that *¿Quién lo mató?* was, to date, Amazon Studios’ most-watched series (Hopewell, 2024). Perhaps part of this success can be explained precisely by the search for meaning in the particular conditions of violence, injustice, and the breakdown of some of the basic human values that our Latin American societies face –and have historically faced. And perhaps, on the other hand, it is also the fascination with otherness– with the almost unbelievable and distant horror –that drives the appeal of these series in other television markets, beyond the region.

#### CONCLUSIONS: CHANGES IN NARRATIVES ABOUT THE PAST

Without a doubt, the birth and expansion of streaming platforms have transformed the way narratives about social time are constructed on “television”. The picture we have painted so far shows a shift away from the production of meanings about the past. With the emergence of new production companies, operating under the logic and content strategies of transnational platforms, within legal frameworks that have opened the door to co-production, delocalization, and new forms of financing, there has been a break with the type of “historiographical” narratives that had predominated in the traditional broadcasting model; that is, television stories linked to the construction or reinforcement of an ideal of the nation-state, great deeds, heroes, and patriotic figures.

What we observe, then, is an explosion of narratives about the past (or pasts, in the plural), radiating from a multiplicity of production enclaves. However, multiplicity in this case should not be taken as synonymous with diversity, because, despite their abundance, these numerous stories about the past follow a common pattern, redundant both in their “packaging” (genre, format, resources) and in the type(s) of past they bring back to the screen. It is an explosion that tends toward uniformity.

However, by focusing on dark, controversial, or unresolved areas of the past in Mexico, Colombia, or other Latin American countries, these transnational narratives bring those events back into the spotlight and reignite the discussions surrounding them, also causing some significant tensions at the national level, linked to the changing memories themselves, articulated with patterns of consumption at the regional level.

Series such as *Narcos* and *El Chapo* not only expose violence, but also the penetration of drug trafficking networks into political and security institutions in Latin America, reigniting questions about their responsibilities and complicity in the processes that have led to our violent present. Others, such as *¿Quién lo mató?* and *Historia de un crimen: Colosio* reconstruct murders in which doubts still persist about who was responsible. They address how official investigations can be influenced by political interests and call into question the official versions of events. They revive rumors, hypotheses about the cases, and conspiracy theories surrounding them; they question political and judicial institutions, expose their shortcomings, and reveal corruption, impunity, and manipulation. In contrast to the more monolithic, harmonious, and uplifting stories of the nation, these narratives show other sides: those of defeats and failures, of recent and imperfect pasts that have shaped the deeply conflictive present of our societies.

In this sense, legislative changes, new forms of financing, collaboration between new production companies, and the expansion needs of platforms disrupt the normative function of the historical narrative of perpetual state surveillance, constructing other forms of relationship between transnational audiences and a past that navigates between nostalgia, the questioning of grand narratives, sensationalism, and the

need for testimony that provides a sense of verisimilitude. The mix of figures from the business and financial world with relevant players in the audiovisual industry in the companies we reported about in this paper highlights the convergence of new actors who, beyond traditional production, have transformed narratives to generate new proposals for memory linked to a transnational market of stories, creating tensions with forms of remembrance anchored in the logic of broadcasting-nation. This text is only a window into a new agenda for monitoring and analyzing these narratives and the possible ways of thinking socially in the time they generate.

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