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Pop Culture and Latin America's Conflicts

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Image by Batalla de Arauca

Latin America has been plagued with internal conflicts for decades, be them against left-wing insurgencies or narco-cartels. Naturally, regional film and television industries have utilized them as sources of inspiration for the plots of films and soap operas (the famous Latin American *telenovelas*). How Latin American security forces are portrayed in these productions is controversial, as there seems to be a bias towards portraying them in a negative way. Whether this is done on purpose or not is debatable, however it appears that regional defense officers believe that entertainment industries deliberately critique them while glorifying criminals. This is

an important issue to keep in mind as the entertainment industry has an important effect on how the civilian population views its government and security forces.

Which Wars to Portray?

Prior to beginning our discussion on how conflicts are portrayed by Latin American entertainment industries, we first need to clarify what types of conflicts are depicted. For example, Hollywood producers have the dubious luxury of being able to make a film inspired by one of the many military operations that the US has carried out throughout the world, as portrayed in films like *American Sniper*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Lone Survivor*, *Platoon*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, to name a few.

On the other hand, it is important to note that as violent as Latin America is perceived to be, inter-state conflict in the region is actually scarce. Case in point, the last inter-state war in the region occurred in 1995: a short-lived, non-declared war between Ecuador and Peru. The most recent conflict prior to that one was the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982 between Argentina and the United Kingdom. Rather, Latin American militaries and police forces have been deployed internally to combat insurgencies in various countries, between the 1960s to mid-1990s, as well as drug trafficking entities nowadays, like Mexico's war against narco-cartels, and transnational gangs like the Maras that operate in El Salvador and Honduras.

In other words, while Hollywood can produce a film that depicts a real U.S. military operation abroad, Latin American producers wishing to tell stories about recent real world Latin American military operations have to, by default, focus on internal conflicts.

How Are They Portrayed?

Due to space issues, we cannot discuss every Latin American production, whether a film or telenovela, that addresses some regional internal conflict, whether it be against left-leaning insurgents or a narco-cartel. The list below includes films that, in the author's opinion, provide a particularly harsh portrayal of regional defense forces.

At a personal level, one of the earliest TV portrayals of the Peruvian military that the author watched was the Peruvian telenovela *Los De Arriba y Los De Abajo* (The Elite and Lower Ones) in the early-mid 1990s. One of the telenovela's subplots revolved around an army commander who accidentally orders his troops to fire upon a group of civilians in an Andean town while they were searching for terrorists. The commander and the widow of one of the men killed meet again decades later after their children fall in love. The inspiration for this plot comes from the real-life conflict between the Peruvian military and two terrorist movements, the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*, SL) and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru*, MRTA). The military has been accused of carrying out massacres against civilians throughout the 1980s and early 1990s during the internal war against said movements (e.g. the 1985 Accomarca massacre). Another controversial soap opera is Brazil's *Amor e Revolução* (*Love and Revolution*), which has been critiqued for focusing on human rights abuses committed by the Brazilian military government (1964-1985).

As for movies, most critique regional militaries. For example, the 2006 Colombian-Argentine film *Soñar No Cuesta Nada (Dreaming Is Free)* focuses on a group of Colombian soldiers who discover a cache of money belonging to the insurgent movement Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC); rather than reporting the find, they keep the money and spend it amongst themselves. The film was inspired by a similar real-life 2003 incident. Similarly, the 2003 Argentine drama *Captive* discusses the fate of children who were adopted by families connected to the military after their parents were disappeared by the Argentine military government (1976-1983). Decades later, these individuals have begun to find out their true identities. Like the aforementioned *Soñar No Cuesta Nada*, the film is inspired by real events. For instance, in 2015 the Argentine media reported that a man called Mario Bravo discovered his true identity: as a child he was taken away from his mother who was arrested by the military government in the 1970s.

Another example is the 2009 Peruvian film *La Teta Asustada (The Milk of Sorrow)* which discusses the fate of Peruvians that were affected by the massacres committed by Peruvian insurgents and the security forces during the country's internal war (early 1980s to mid-1990s). The movie's IMDB webpage summarizes the plot: "Fausta is suffering from a rare disease called the Milk of Sorrow, which is transmitted through the breast milk of pregnant women who were abused or raped during or soon after pregnancy." A scene from the movie, in which the main character hyperventilates after seeing a photo of a military officer, implies that the Peruvian armed forces in some way abused her or her family.

A final example is the 2004 Mexican film *Voces Inocentes (Innocent Voices)* which focuses on El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992). The movie tells the story of children and teenagers that were forced to join the Salvadoran military to combat the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, FMLN). The role of child soldiers in this Central American nation's civil war has also been well recorded.

It is the opinion of this author, which also appears to be the opinion of some Latin American defense officers, that the aforementioned movies address specific incidents or scandals, all of them unfortunately true, which give the viewer a negative opinion about armed forces. The problem may be that such productions lack a degree of balance, like for example some statement that not *all* military officers and troops behaved in such despicable manner during these periods of internal warfare or military rule.

Liberation Wars and Inter-State Conflict

To be fair, there have been films which portray Latin American militaries in a positive light, however they tend to focus on 19th century conflicts, namely the region's independence wars. For example, the 2013 film *The Liberator* is a Venezuelan-Spanish historical movie which centers on the life of revered South American liberator Simón Bolívar. Similarly, there have been several movies about the Argentine José de San Martín, the region's other liberator. Moreover, *Gloria del Pacífico* named the best Peruvian film in 2014, is about the 19th century War of the Pacific (between Peru and Bolivia against Chile, supported by the British Empire). The movie focuses on Peruvian Army hero Francisco Bolognesi.

It is worth noting that Argentina has produced movies about the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War, which, as previously mentioned, was an inter-state conflict. Such films include 2005's *Illuminados Por El Fuego* or 1984's *Los Chicos de la Guerra* (*The Boys of War*)

A Sensitive Issue

Cinematographic and television portrayals of militaries and real world security operations are a sensitive issue. For example the film *Zero Dark Thirty* was critiqued as it showcased US intelligence officers (repeatedly) torturing prisoners to gather intelligence during the hunt for Osama bin Laden. This is even more controversial in Latin America as the conflicts portrayed in most films address civil wars and other internal conflicts, rather than operations on the other side of the globe. Another problem is that these films are about recent conflicts, some of which are still ongoing (e.g. Colombia). In other words, they will be even more relatable to viewers.

As part of the research for this analysis, the author carried out off-the-record interviews with members of Latin American security and defense agencies. The overall consensus, albeit from a miniscule pool of interviewees, is that regional television and cinematographic industries portray a skewed version of reality when it comes to the activities carried out by these agencies to protect the homeland. Namely, security forces are portrayed as “los malos,” (the bad ones) meaning that they are consistently showcased carrying out human rights abuses whether they be disappearances, rape, summary execution of civilians, or other abuses of power.

On the other hand, as one Colombian security officer explained to the author, there is a reversal of values, as narco lords like the infamous Pablo Escobar appear as a charismatic individual with altruistic goals, for example in series like *Narcos*; *Pablo Escobar: El Patron del Mal* (*Pablo Escobar: The Lord of Evil*); *La Reina del Sur* (*The Queen of the South*); *El Señor de Los Cielos* (*The Lord of Heaven*), among others. The officer explained that this portrayal does not allow the viewer to properly understand the duties and sacrifices of the members of the security and defense forces to protect the homeland.

At this point, it is worth remembering that in the US, Hollywood (broadly speaking) is often critiqued by conservative media outlets of having a “liberal agenda” which aims at vilifying the U.S. military. We will not delve into conspiracy theories regarding whether there is some “agenda” behind Latin American cinematographic and television productions and the negative way they portray security forces. Nevertheless, the author would like to highlight a comment by a retired Peruvian army officer about the way the country's military has been portrayed in the aforementioned films and telenovelas. The officer explained “these people [meaning the producers and directors] have disliked the military since the time when it was in control of the country, this [the movies and telenovelas] is their revenge.” Meanwhile, a retired Colombian military officer explained that the country's narco-related telenovelas are “apologists of crime.”

The issue, thus, may be one of perception. Are Latin American producers and filmmakers purposely trying to make security forces look “bad,” because of personal biasness? Additionally, do narco-novelas aim at glorifying narco lords and the narco life, or is this for dramatic effect in order to attract viewers? No Latin American filmmakers, producers or script writers were consulted by the author, but the perception from interviewed Latin American defense and

security officers (again from a very small number, but the author will cautiously generalize it) is that regional films and telenovelas focus on humanizing and even praising insurgents and criminals, while critiquing militaries and police forces. As a retired Colombian defense officer explained, this issue is part of a wider problem of civil military relations at a time of internal conflict. The officer explained, “in Latin America, certain social organizations consider themselves the exclusive owners of issues like the protection of minorities and human rights in general ... they maximize any error or criminal act, done purposely or by accident, committed by defense forces while minimizing the atrocities committed by terrorists.”

One example of a positive portrayal of modern Latin American forces could be the Colombian television series *Comando Elite*, produced by RCN, which focuses on a police unit that combats crime, taking down real-life Colombian narco-lords and insurgent leaders. However, the overall pattern appears to be that portraying defense forces by default requires a negative portrayal, rather than a positive one. It is certainly possible to make a film that positively showcases the bravery of specific units in the field of battle, like for example the Mexican military’s operations against narco-cartels, or the Peruvian Army’s successes against Shining Path and the MRTA, however they may be critiqued for appearing as government-propaganda and not showcasing abuses committed by security forces, which have been well-recorded.

Due to space limitations we have not discussed the relationship between governments and entertainment industries, and the possibility of state-censorship of films or series critical of security forces. This author would argue that fact that these projects continue to be produced and broadcasted is an example of the general success of freedom of speech in Latin America (at least in this specific industry and in most countries, with some exceptions). If anything, regional film producers desire more state support for their movies to reach wider masses. For example, the film industry and the local governments in Colombia and Peru have attempted to design legislation to support their domestic cinematographic industry, while there are programs in countries like Argentina and Mexico where the state provides financial support, like subsidies, towards domestic television and film industries.

Concluding Thoughts

The influence of films on the views of populations is an issue that has been researched by academics. For example, Michelle Pautz, Associate Professor at the University of Dayton, has published an essay analyzing the influence of *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty* on how U.S. citizens view their government. In a 2015 blog commentary about her research, Professor Pautz states “films that have a more distinctive characterization of characters and institutions might foster a greater influence on viewers. Put differently, if the “good guys” and “bad guys” are easier to determine, films might be able to influence their audiences.” Meanwhile, in a 2014 interview for the Peruvian daily *Diario Correo*, Peruvian actor Reynaldo Arenas, who had a role in *Gloria del Pacifico*, declared that “cinema teaches the youth to not forget history. This art must entertain, educate and inform.” Both Professor Pautz and Mr. Arenas touch on the issue of effects of movies in viewers, with the Peruvian actor taking the stance that movies have a sort of social duty.

Latin America is a region that has experienced major civil unrest over the past decades, morphing in type, from ideological-oriented uprisings to high levels of street violence and the so-called “war on drugs.” Naturally, regional television and film producers have plenty of material that can inspire them to write telenovelas and movies that discuss particular incidents or the consequences of abuses carried out by defense forces in the aforementioned internal conflicts. Hence, the reason why there’s a significant amount of productions about these internal conflicts may be simply because they are topical and it is something that viewers can relate to. Nevertheless, at least one of the aforementioned interviewed defense officers seems to believe that there is a resentment behind these films and telenovelas given how defense forces are portrayed while narco-criminals tend to be glorified.

It would certainly be a welcome development to have major productions that portray the efforts of modern military forces in a positive light, like what has been done with movies relating to the 19th century independence wars, but the problem is that they may in turn be dismissed as government propaganda. Nevertheless, as Professor Pautz and Mr. Arenas highlight, movies do have an influence on the perceptions of moviegoers and it would be a good method of improving popular opinion about security forces in the region since, while it is true that (many) human rights abuses have been unfortunately committed during internal security operations, Latin America is ripe with stories of heroes and heroines who gave their lives to protect their homeland from various internal threats. Militaries and police forces can win wars, but the television and cinematographic industries are critical components that will determine whether or not they will be remembered as heroes.