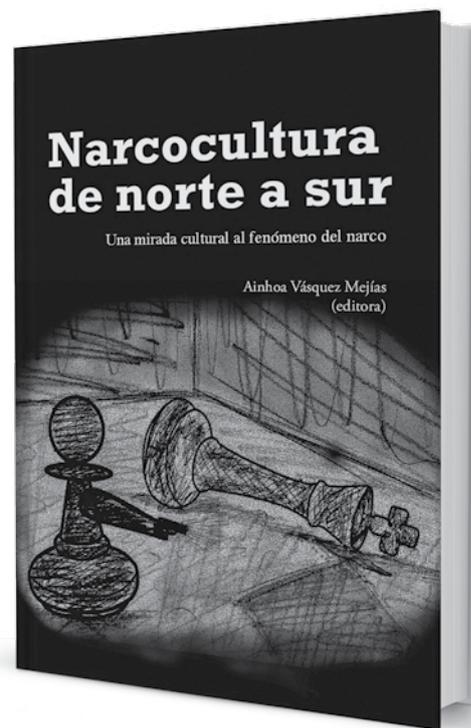


Narcocultura de Norte a Sur.
Una mirada cultural al fenómeno del narco
 (Narco Culture, North to South.
 A Cultural Look at Drug Trafficking)
 Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías, ed.
 CISAN, UNAM/Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua
 Mexico City, 2017, 223 pp.



Narco culture is a relatively new phenomenon to academia. The first time I dealt with it was when I wrote the protocol for my bachelor's thesis; when I looked into the state-of-the-art literature on it, I was surprised to find very little information, even though the phenomenon was decades old.

Today, eight years after my first approach, information continues to be sparse, although the references have been enriched with excellent works like those that I will review here.

Narcocultura de Norte a Sur (Narco Culture, North to South) is the outcome of a project headed by Ainhoa

Vásquez Mejías, a talented Chilean researcher. It began with an international colloquium; some of the papers presented there make up the chapters in this book. But, where did this very singular theme come from? It all began with the concrete existence of drug trafficking, one kind of organized crime, the illegal trade in narcotics. Probably due to how it was dealt with in public policy under the administration of former President Felipe Calderón, today, drug trafficking has been consolidated as an expanding phenomenon that affects the economic, social, and cultural fabric of society, and whose effects impact everything, from car sales to young people's values and aspirations. It is also reflected in some popular phenomena, such as music and the construction of a certain aesthetic.

We can find, then, a particular sub-culture inside Mexico's hegemonic culture specifically corresponding to the sphere of drug trafficking. It is called "narco culture." It is integrated into the social context through *habitus*,¹ and becomes naturalized through the construction of this sub-culture among certain social sectors, creating a new identity adopted as the result of the situation experienced day to day. In this way, narco culture "convinces no one but believers."²

All this has become a very important topic given that it involves the expression of the identity of a part of Mexican society: on the one hand, those directly involved in the world of drug trafficking (drug bosses, hit-men, dealers, etc.) and, on the other, those who participate in the culture created by the former, even if they have no direct connection with them and may just like *narcocorrido* music or to dress like drug traffickers. Narco culture, then, is the manifestation of a reality that cannot be banned. That is how it becomes part of the collective imaginary and the source of inspiration for the social construction of reality, and therefore, of something that, one way or another, projects the activities and feelings of those social realities: literature.

We could begin an interesting debate about the effect of literature and, therefore, its impact on society. Can we prove that reading about a specific phenomenon, listening to music with certain content, or watching television series or movies about a certain topic has some influence on behavior? Or, to the contrary, are these manifestations of the cultural industry nothing more than a reflection of the society that they come from?

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The arguments pro and con have been studied, and not only with regard to drug trafficking, but the important thing is to point out that these manifestations of narco culture exist and play a role in the entire fabric of society.

Thanks to the media, literature's reach is not confined to the publication of a text that few can read. Rather, these works become a reference point for the so-called cultural industry, with all that this implies. From the first manifestations that circulated the drug traffickers' exploits in songs, to the more elaborate storylines about the life of a certain drug boss, the "narco novels" (literary narrative about narco stories) now take us into that world that we do not want to be a part of but that at the same time are dying of curiosity about, appealing to our repressed impulses regarding violence, drugs, and sex. Stories brimming with corruption, death, and injustices are the raw material of this relatively new literary genre, and it must be said that it in itself is an object for debate.

Delving into the stories described in this kind of literary product requires a special taste for brutal tales that use no "literary language" to metaphorically dress up the situations they describe, since crudity of expression is a basic characteristic of this kind of text. But that does not mean that they leave out elements of human nature: sentiments and emotions manage to weave themselves into the violence characteristic of drug traffickers.

Based on the analysis of several representative works, *Narcocultura de Norte a Sur* takes us by the hand through different scenarios related to the phenomenon: from the first documented *narcocorridos* —or at least the closest thing to them— that Arturo García Niño's essay uses to introduce us to a reflection about narrative on this topic written in Mexico, to the analysis of concrete works in this genre, such as the pioneering *Con-*

trabando or *Entre perros* (Among the Dogs), and the most recent manifestation, the narco series.

As García Niño mentions, the narrative written *to be read* is the continuation of the narrative written *to be sung*, and both are precursors of the narrative conceived as images put to music. And all three are cultural products in permanent circulation. The author adds that marketing has been very good at transforming “the narco” into a product. This is also analyzed by Diana Palaversich, who explains the importance of “all things narco” for that discipline.

One of the social groups that most consumes narco culture are the young: among other reasons, they are often the main characters in the stories of a world in which, if you aren’t skilled enough, you can very well not live very long, or, if you’re too daring, you can also disappear. But, can this be considered dangerous?

Opinions are divided, like about everything involving drug trafficking. However, as happens with every sub-culture, the responsibility for propagating it both actively and passively falls mainly to the young. We can see this in certain stories centered precisely around this age group, as is explained in a couple of the chapters (“Literatura, infancia y narcotráfico: leer como el axolotl” [Literature, Childhood, and Drug Trafficking: Read Like the Axolotl] and “Juvenicidio, sistema neoliberal y narco: ¿una generación *culpable* de su muerte? Las crónicas de Javier Valdez Cárdenas y Diego Enrique Osorno” [Youthicide, Neoliberal System, and Drug Trafficking: A Generation *Guilty* of Its Death? The Chronicles of Javier Valdez Cárdenas and Diego Enrique Osorno], which analyze the role of young people in this world.

From the oral tradition, with the *narcocorrido* as a means of disseminating the drug trafficking world, we move on to the written tradition, represented by narco novels. Thanks to a hyper-production of the latter by transnational publishing houses, we have access to works that could be defined as “600-page *narcocorridos*,” such as the popular *Reina del Sur* (Queen of the South) by Spanish writer Arturo Pérez-Reverte. The public loves their action-packed plots bursting with violence and sex, underlining what the readership demands: attractive scenes and “real” situations that they can also identify with.

For his part, Felipe Oliver delves into how the traditional revolutionary *corrido* was displaced by stories

of drug traffickers, who sparked enormous curiosity among ordinary people. Oliver’s chapter refers to the existence of a direct line of progression from the verses of a *corrido* to the development of a narco story, which expands the idea put forward in the original.

The study of the narco culture based on its different products has become a pressing need. However, instead of just examining it from the point of view of a single discipline (sociology, economics, or law, for example), what is required is an inter-disciplinary approach, since its effects on society are not confined to an area covered by a single discipline.

One of the main sources of information for researchers who study this phenomenon is the stories told in different cultural narco narratives because that reality that peeks through the fiction is a slippery object of study, difficult to access. In this sense, I recognize the importance of analyzing the narco narrative because the interpretation of these sources of information depends completely on works such as the one Ainhoa Vázquez Mejías and her colleagues present us. Here, we can study not only the content of the work, but also the characteristics of the genre and the handling of fiction within it.

Considering the historical context of a work of literature is extremely important for interpreting it correctly. The narco narrative is not a strictly accurate reflection of reality, but it does offer fiction fed by circumstances that sometimes involve much more intense issues than the final product presents. ■■■

Ana Georgina Aldaba Guzmán

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NOTES

¹ *Habitus* includes the mental or cognitive structures through which individuals behave in the social world; they have a series of internalized schema through which they perceive, understand, appreciate, and evaluate the *outside* world. Dialectically, the *habitus* is the product of the internalization of the structures of the social world. They represent the social structures of our subjectivity, which are initially constituted based on our first experiences (primary *habitus*) and later, on our adult life (secondary *habitus*). This is the way in which social structures are emblazoned on our minds and our bodies by interiorizing the exterior.

² Luis Astorga, *Mitología del narcotraficante en México* (Mexico City: UNAM /Plaza y Valdés, 2004), p. 5.