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# Artificial intelligence in the work and view of Latin American filmmakers: insights from a qualitative interview study

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## Abstract

Previous research on the representation of artificial intelligence (AI) in science fiction (SF) film has largely focused on the Global North. Little is known about how filmmakers from the Souths envision and portray AI and how their creative processes and outputs relate to specific conditions of film production, socio-political realities, and global power imbalances, as well as personal experiences and attitudes toward AI. This paper aims to address this gap by presenting the findings of an exploratory interview study with Latin American filmmakers who have dealt with AI in their films. The qualitative text analysis of 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 participants from 6 countries reveals that their cinematic visions of AI differ significantly from those prevalent in Western SF: The Latin American filmmakers predominantly associate AI with social control, surveillance, labor exploitation, data colonialism, and the abuse of power by (authoritarian) governments or powerful tech corporations—issues that decolonial scholars have emphasized in their critiques of AI. However, the participants' visions are not primarily inspired by these academic debates but by their lived experiences. The filmmakers' strong engagement with everyday life and socio-political conditions, rather than distant or unattainable technological scenarios, can, thus, be considered a distinctive feature of the Latin American approach. This is further reflected in their use of particular esthetic concepts and strategies, such as retrofuturism, which enable them to navigate budgetary constraints and other structural inequalities that limit their visibility and their potential to actively shape technological visions and futures through film.

**Keywords** AI imaginaries · AI representations · Science fiction film · Latin America · Decolonial theory · Epistemic injustice

## 1 Introduction

Science fiction (SF) typically explores futuristic technological scenarios, often serving as a catalyst for technological progress, public discourse, and critique (Kirby 2010; Bassett et al. 2013; Kotásek 2023). In this respect, SF can be considered an integral part of society's ongoing engagement with the present and future of technology. This is also true for artificial intelligence (AI), which has been the subject of internationally renowned films[1] and the focus of academic debates in various fields, such as AI ethics, regulation, and governance (for examples, see Jobin et al. (2019); Bareis and Katzenbach (2022); Murgia (2024)), or the technology's impact on labor (Deranty and Corbin 2024) and the art ecosystem (Baradaran 2024). Research on the representation of AI in film has largely focused on narratives (Hermann 2023), perceptions (Kumar and Rukmini 2024), the popular imagination (Goode 2018), and associated hopes and fears (Cave

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[1] Influential examples include *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984, USA), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001, USA), *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004, USA/GER), *Transcendence* (Wally Pfister, 2014, USA), and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014, UK).

and Dihal 2019). However, the canon of films considered in these studies lacks diversity: Western contributions, mainly by male US authors and loaded with corresponding biases, dominate the field (Adams 2020; Cave et al. 2023; Cave and Dihal 2023a), whereas works from the Souths[2] are severely underrepresented.

Several factors contribute to this underrepresentation. First, epistemic and epistemological injustices that remain from historical colonialism (Quijano 2007) have had a strong impact on artists and scholars from the Souths, who bear the consequences of the "epistemicide" (Santos 2014) of Non-Western knowledge and experiences (Mignolo 2009). Epistemic imbalances between the Norths and Souths are particularly pronounced in technology-related fields such as machine learning (Hakopian 2024). Here, a *white*[3] male mainstream predominates (Roche et al. 2021), limiting the opportunities of the Souths to actively shape AI as well as related discourses. Second, filmmakers from the Souths face structural disadvantages such as limited access to film funding, coaching, post-production, and international distribution (The Royal Society 2018). Moreover, in commercial distribution circuits, works are typically measured against the standards of Western filmmaking (Ott 2015), which limits the opportunities for productions from the Souths to be presented to a broader audience.

The underrepresentation of Southern perspectives has negative consequences both at the level of discourse, which remains unbalanced and incomplete, and the level of tech design, which would benefit from a higher diversity of perspectives. As The Royal Society (2018) highlights, the overemphasis on unrealistic scenarios and myths in Western SF—such as robot uprisings or the achievement of singularity (Goode 2018)—may distract audiences from pressing challenges, many of which disproportionately affect the Souths who often do not benefit adequately from technological developments (Arun 2020; Burkhardt 2023). Examples include algorithmic discrimination (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018; Ananya 2024), data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2019), high energy and water consumption that contribute to climate change (Luccioni 2022; Li 2023), and precarious labor (Gray and Suri 2019; Tubaro et al. 2020). None of these challenges have been addressed in depth in Western SF. Whether and how they are reflected in SF films from the Souths has been little studied, partly due to the invisibility and, in some cases, inaccessibility of these works. Pioneering studies on global AI narratives and imaginaries (Cave and Dihal 2023b) as well as works on algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher 2012; 2017), folk theories (Siles et al. 2020), and stories about algorithms (Schellewald 2022; Obreja 2024) offer promising approaches to further explore (audio)visual cultures of AI, but they focus neither on film nor on the creative processes behind filmmaking. The specific experiences of filmmakers from the Souths, which often include struggles against structural and epistemic injustices, have not been examined in depth either. This paper seeks to address these gaps by presenting the findings of a qualitative interview study with Latin American (LatAm[4]) filmmakers who have dealt with AI in their films.

The interview study builds on an exploratory film study, in which a sample of LatAm films was analyzed using qualitative film analysis methods. This analysis revealed that, within the sample, AI is predominantly associated with issues highlighted in decolonial critiques of AI, which stand in contrast to common themes of Western SF. Starting from this surprising finding, the interview study was designed to explore—and help explain—the particularities of LatAm SF films by delving into the filmmakers' perspectives on AI and its representation in film. Central guiding questions included: How do LatAm filmmakers imagine and envision AI? How do they translate these visions into film? Where do they draw inspiration from? And to what extent do personal experiences and the conditions of life and film production within the LatAm context influence cinematic representations of AI? With the aim of identifying potential links between the filmmakers' perspectives and the cinematic visions of AI prevalent in the sample of LatAm films, the interviews were not limited to questions about AI imaginaries, visions, and representations,[5] but further inquired after the filmmakers' personal experiences and attitudes toward AI, their engagement with artistic, academic, and public discourses on AI, as well as their thoughts on common strategies—such as ethics and regulation—for addressing AI-related threats. The analysis of the interviews followed an abductive approach "aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This was carried out against the backdrop of a specific theoretical

[2] In this text, I will use the term "the Souths" instead of "the Global South", following Milan and Treré (2019) who use the plural to highlight the heterogeneity of these regions and societies and omit the term "Global" to avoid its misleading geographical connotation. In their definition, "the Souths" refers to any individual or group that "suffer[s] discrimination, and/or enact[s] resistance to injustice and oppression" (Milan and Treré 2019).

[3] In the following, *white* and *Black* are italicized when referring to (socially constructed) ethnicity.

[4] In the following, the common abbreviation "LatAm" is used instead of the adjective "Latin American". The noun "Latin America" is not abbreviated to facilitate differentiation.

[5] I define 'AI imaginaries' as collective, socio-technical ideas about AI, whereas 'AI visions' refers to the filmmakers' individual and creative concepts of AI. By 'AI representations,' I mean the cinematic portrayals of AI.

lens, primarily informed by critical and decolonial theories on AI (see Sect. 2).

The analysis of ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with LatAm filmmakers yielded insights on several levels: first, into the connection between specific cinematic representations of AI in LatAm films and the filmmakers' personal experiences, views, and attitudes; second, into their creative processes, sources of inspiration, and forms of creative resistance; and third, into the structural reasons behind the lack of visibility—and, at times, appreciation—of LatAm films as valuable contributions to discourses on AI.

## 2 Theoretical lens: key concepts, strengths, and limitations

An essential element of the abductive approach is the interpretation of empirical data in light of existing theories. Since the researcher's 'theoretical lens'—what Timmermans and Tavory (2012) refer to as the "researcher's cultivated position"—strongly shapes, and potentially limits, their horizon of sense-making, it must be critically reflected upon. In my case, decolonial and critical theories—operating from a perspective of the Souths and/or global justice—have most significantly informed my understanding of AI and related discourses and imaginaries. For the sake of transparency, I will briefly outline the main theoretical concepts and explain how they have influenced my findings.

To begin with, it is important to note that Latin America occupies a distinct position in global debates on AI, shaped by the long-standing tension between (imposed) technological modernity and (resistance to) enduring colonial legacies. Key intellectual antecedents from the region include works such as José Enrique Rodó's essay *Ariel*, Roberto Fernández Retamar's *Caliban*, and Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibalist Manifesto*, which exemplify Latin America's critical engagement with imported epistemologies and worldviews, often through strategies of resistance, transformation, and appropriation. This orientation has also found expression in technological innovations such as Chile's *Project Cybersyn*, developed under the administration of Salvador Allende—a pioneering cybernetic effort to manage the national economy through a decentralized, real-time computer network that has since inspired LatAm SF. Against this backdrop, the creative resistance of contemporary LatAm SF filmmakers—both to imposed models of technological 'progress' and to Western norms of film production—should be understood as a continuation of the broader struggle to navigate structural marginalization within global techno-cultural systems, as well as an active effort to decolonize technology and its associated imaginaries through film.

Theoretical discussions on the decolonization of AI build on this tradition of LatAm critical thought. Following Aníbal Quijano (2007, 2014) and his concept of the "coloniality of power," scholars—predominantly from the Souths—have applied decolonial thinking to various spheres of AI. Examples include decolonial computing (Ali 2013), diversity-aware design (Costanza-Chock 2020; Schelenz 2023), and philosophical or ethical reflection (Mohamed et al. 2020; Adams 2021; Cruz 2021). Sareeta Amrute (2019) has aptly defined colonial relationships as being "hierarchical, extractive, and exploitative". Indeed, in AI and its supporting infrastructures, we can see the three dimensions of coloniality at work (Burkhardt 2025): in hierarchies of production and use (Schopp et al. 2019; Arun 2020; Nothias 2020; Peña and Varon 2021), in the extraction of data (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Mohamed et al. 2020) and natural resources (McNeish and Shapiro 2021; Warnecke-Berger et al. 2022), and in the exploitation of cheap and forced labor all along the supply chain of AI (Verité 2014; Gray and Suri 2019; Crawford 2021; Hao and Hernández 2022). As reports on precarious labor in areas such as data labeling, content moderation, and reinforcement learning have shown, these tasks are frequently outsourced to countries in the Souths through subcontractors of major AI-producing tech companies. Key hubs of this largely invisible human labor include the Philippines and Kenya (Perrigo 2023), as well as LatAm countries such as Venezuela, where ongoing economic crises have driven many individuals into platform-based crowd work (Hao and Hernández 2022). A prominent example of such a platform is Amazon's *Mechanical Turk*, which has drawn sustained criticism for inadequate labor protections and recurring scandals involving psychological harm and unpaid compensation (Hao and Hernández 2022), while providing a low-cost infrastructure that primarily benefits AI development companies in the Norths.

The decolonial project seeks to unveil and oppose coloniality in all its manifestations. Consequently, Rachel Adams (2021) argues that comprehensive decolonization must encompass several levels, such as reflection, action, and imagination. Correspondingly, Quijano (2007) stresses the significance of opening up language *and* images for the decolonization of knowledge. Arturo Escobar's concept of the "pluriverse" (Escobar 2018) has become particularly influential in this context. It stands in opposition to a hegemonic Western world order and emphasizes the plurality and equality of perspectives and truths, which, according to Escobar (2018), should ideally be designed at the local level. The significance of alternative technological visions and inclusive dialog is similarly emphasized by Cruz (2021) who points out that "[o]vercoming coloniality also means building and fostering other sociotechnical imaginaries." Referring to the historically strong tie

between coloniality and capitalism (Couldry and Mejias 2021) and highlighting the importance of non-Western perspectives for the decolonization of knowledge, Ricaurte (2019) adds that "[i]magining alternative digital futures and pluriverses means defending other sensibilities, cultures, and ways of life that do not want to be governed by the market." Finally, Amanda Fricker's (2010) concept of (testimonial) epistemic injustice has been fundamental for identifying and acknowledging the perspectives and groups underrepresented in public discourses despite holding relevant knowledge and experiences. The interview study builds on these ideas by recognizing filmmakers from the Souths as a group affected by epistemic injustice in Fricker's sense, and by exploring not only their visions of AI, but also their ideas for decolonizing technology and related discourses through film.

The theoretical lens outlined above has shaped the interview study on multiple levels. First, decolonial theory provided critical insights into AI-related injustices and was, therefore, instrumental in defining the focus of the study. Second, scholarship on the coloniality of AI informed the identification of corresponding motifs in the film plots, which are addressed in the interviews. Third, decolonial activism and its resonance in artistic movements (see, for an influential example, Coding Rights 2023) sparked my interest in tracing elements of decolonial thinking and resistance in the films. This interest is reflected in parts of the catalog of questions and, consequently, in the coding of the interviews. Fourth, the decolonial lens inspired the study's focus group and region: on the one hand, perspectives from Latin America seemed particularly promising for exploring cinematic visions from a decolonial perspective, as the region has been deeply affected by the colonialization of culture (Quijano 2007) and, at the same time, has been a leading pioneer in the struggle for decolonization.[6] On the other hand, filmmakers—as professionals in the creation of narratives and images—seemed crucial for studying AI-related imaginaries, visions, and representations, as well as strategies for decolonizing visual culture.

While the decolonial lens facilitates the identification of potential links between the filmmakers' perceptions of structural inequalities and their cinematic visions of AI, it might also obscure alternative interpretations. This possibility is, to a certain extent, accepted for the sake of theory building, which is central to the abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). However, methodological choices such as open and multi-layered coding were made to preserve a certain openness to alternative interpretations and to alleviate theoretical distortion (see Sect. 3.5).

## 3 Study design and methodology

### 3.1 Previous work: representations of AI in LatAm films

The interview study builds on an exploratory film study on the representation of AI in LatAm films previously conducted by the author of this paper. A sample of 18 films (6 features, 12 shorts) was analyzed using methods of hermeneutic film analysis (Hickethier 2012) to identify key themes and esthetic tendencies. The films were selected following three criteria: first, they had to be LatAm in terms of production and/or the director's nationality or background; second, they had to feature "portrayals of any machines (or hybrids, such as cyborgs) to which intelligence has been ascribed." (The Royal Society 2018) This broad definition has proven valuable in previous studies (The Royal Society 2018; Cave et al. 2020), as it is not confined to computational operations in the field of machine learning but also encompasses the broader realm of human imagination. Third, the films had to be accessible on DVD/Blu-ray, streaming platforms, or by contacting the producers/directors. The analysis showed that those LatAm films, to a considerable extent, deal with aspects that scholars and activists have identified as 'colonial AI' (see Sect. 2). This surprising insight and the related open questions constitute the starting point for the interview study.

### 3.2 Objectives and research questions

The interview study pursues two main objectives: first, it was designed to critically evaluate my previous interpretations of the sample of LatAm films. As a *white* researcher educated primarily in a Western context and strongly influenced by my theoretical lens (see Sect. 2), I found it essential to ground my interpretations in first-hand accounts from the filmmakers to mitigate personal biases. Second, the interview study aimed at identifying potential links between the filmmakers' cinematic visions and their engagement with AI technologies and discourses, to better understand the films' particular characteristics. For this reason, the interviews focused on the filmmakers' visions of AI and the related creative processes, while also exploring potential factors of influence—such as personal experiences of and

[6] The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano is considered a pioneer of decolonial theory. Decolonial practice is moreover expressed in local governments of indigenous communities throughout Latin America, e.g., the Zapatista movement in Mexico.

attitudes toward AI, perceptions of socio-political contexts and global power dynamics, as well as public discourses on AI. The latter include debates on AI ethics and regulation, a field that can be considered a key approach to tackling AI-related risks.

In line with these objectives and the theoretical lens outlined above, the following research questions arise:

- How do LatAm filmmakers imagine AI, and how do they translate their visions into cinematic representations? To what extent are these visions and representations influenced by specific conditions of life and filmmaking in Latin America, including experiences of coloniality, structural inequalities and injustices, or (decolonial) resistance against them?
- What are the personal attitudes of LatAm filmmakers toward AI, and (how) are these attitudes reflected in their works?
- How do LatAm filmmakers perceive the public discourse on AI in their countries? How do they assess their role and impact as filmmakers in it?
- How do the filmmakers assess the efficacy of AI ethics and regulation in their countries? Where do they see particular need for action?

The research questions served as a basis for the interview question catalog, which was slightly adapted to each individual case (see Sect. 3.4).

### 3.3 Participants and data collection

Since the interview study builds on the previous film study, the ideal participants were the creators of the films analyzed. Requests for participation were sent to those whose contact information was available online (n = 14). Upon receiving positive responses from ten filmmakers (nine directors and one screenwriter/producer), they were sent an informed consent form with detailed information on the study design, research interest, data collection, storage, and use, which included permission for use in academic publications and lectures. The form allowed participants to consent to or decline the recording, transcription, and anonymization of the interviews. Presumably to gain more visibility for their perspectives and works, none of the participants requested anonymity for their interviews, which is why the quotations are not anonymized in this paper. To ensure the ethical acceptability of the study, approval from the ethics committee of the responsible university faculty was sought and obtained.

Between July 2022 and May 2023, 10 interviews with 11 participants—9 directors and 2 screenwriters—were conducted (see Table 1).[7] The participants' countries of origin include Argentina (1), Bolivia (2), Colombia (4), Mexico (1), Peru (2), and the US[8] (1). All interviews were recorded on Zoom and had an average duration of 51 min. Nine interviews were conducted in Spanish and one in English, in accordance with the participants' preferences. They were transcribed manually, following clearly defined transcription rules. The transcriptions were coded using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software (see Sect. 3.5).

### 3.4 Interview procedure

The semi-structured interviews followed a catalog of questions organized around the main research interests (see Sect. 3.2). All interviews were conducted as online face-to-face conversations, designed to foster a relaxed and constructive atmosphere. It should be noted, however, that some participants might have found themselves in an ambivalent role: on the one hand, they were interviewed as experts on filmmaking—a role in which they clearly felt confident. On the other hand, they were asked about their personal assessments of AI and related discourses. Some participants stated that they did not consider themselves experts in these areas and therefore preferred not to go into detail. It cannot be ruled out that, in some cases, this may have influenced their confidence and, consequently, their responses.

### 3.5 Data analysis and presentation

#### 3.5.1 Methodological approach

The analysis of the interviews followed an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Thompson 2022). Starting from surprising empirical evidence—the parallels between decolonial critiques and the representations of AI prevalent in LatAm films—the study was designed to develop "explanatory hypotheses" (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) based on the analysis of the interview material and its interpretation in light of specific theoretical approaches (see Sect. 2). In a first step, the interview transcriptions were analyzed using methods of qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014), which served as a tool to systematically structure the material through coding (see Sect. 3.5.2). In a second step,

[7] In one case, both the director and the screenwriter participated in one interview. Information on the participants' gender and age was not collected. However, from their names and appearances, it can be assumed that most participants are male (10 of 11), and their age ranges from approx. 25 to 65. The unequal gender distribution reflects the strong underrepresentation of women as directors of SF films in Latin America.

[8] The participant from the US, Alex Rivera, was born and raised in the US, but he has Peruvian heritage. His film *Traficantes de Sueños/ Sleep Dealer* (2008) is mainly a Mexican production. Consequently, Rivera's film meets the selection criteria for the film analysis study, and Rivera himself for the interview study.

**Table 1** Meta data of participants and interviews (chronological order)

| Participants | | | Interviews | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Name (professional role in film) | AI-related film (year, country of production, classification) | Country of origin (residence at time of interview) | Date | Type | Language | Duration |
| Sergio Vargas (director); Jorge Rollano (screenwriter) | *Anomalía* (2019, Bolivia, feature) | Bolivia (Cochabamba); Bolivia (Cochabamba) | 07/27/2022 | Zoom call (video and audio) | Spanish | 1:11:44 |
| Jorge Caballero (director) | *La Paradoja del Arrow* (2018, Colombia, short) | Colombia (Barcelona, Spain) | 08/03/2022 | Zoom call (audio) | Spanish | 0:47:50 |
| Sebastián Plasencia (director) | *Jane* (2019, Peru, short) | Peru (Lima) | 08/04/2022 | Zoom call (video and audio) | Spanish | 0:42:06 |
| Jonathan Plaza (director) | *I am* (2012, Argentina, short) | Argentina (Buenos Aires) | 08/09/2022 | Zoom call (video and audio) | Spanish | 0:42:00 |
| Ricardo Sosa (director) | *Obediencia* (2019, Colombia, short) | Colombia (Bogotá) | 08/10/2022 | Zoom call (video and audio) | Spanish | 0:54:02 |
| Jehisel Ramos (director, with Eri Pedrozo) | *Control Z* (2021, Colombia, animation short) | Colombia (Madrid, Spain) | 08/15/2022 | Zoom-Call (video and audio) | Spanish | 1:05:00 |
| Alex Rivera (director) | Sleep Dealer (2008, Mexico/USA, feature) | USA (Los Angeles) | 09/07/2022 | Zoom call (video and audio) | English | 0:51:48 |
| Dago García (screenwriter; producer) | *El Paseo de Teresa* (2017, Colombia, feature) | Colombia (Bogotá) | 01/31/2023 | Zoom call (video and audio) | Spanish | 0:52:48 |
| Aldo Salvini (director) | *El Corazón de la Luna* (2021, Peru, feature) | Peru (Lima) | 02/01/2023 | Zoom call (video and audio) | Spanish | 1:04:52 |
| Alejandro Molina (director) | *De Día y de Noche* (2010, Mexico, feature) | Mexico (Mexico City) | 05/16/2023 | Zoom call (video and audio) | Spanish | 1:00:00 |

the results of this analysis (see Sect. 4) were synthesized by linking some of the most salient findings across different categories (see Sect. 5). This procedure allowed for the development of potentially novel theoretical insights, which represents a key objective and strength of the abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Thompson 2022). Nevertheless, this approach also entails clear limitations. As abductive sense-making, according to Timmermans and Tavory (2012), is inherently "creative," somewhat "conjectural," and strongly shaped by the researcher's "cultivated position," it does not constitute a suitable approach "to discover a singular objective truth" (Thompson 2022). Instead, it represents "an ongoing pragmatic process of 'puzzling out' and problem solving" (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), aimed at identifying "the most logical solution and useful explanation for phenomena" (Thompson 2022). While the interview data do support the plausibility of the findings, the study cannot provide definitive verification. This limitation could be addressed by future, more comprehensive studies.

### 3.5.2 Coding and category building

As Jamie Thompson (2022) points out with reference to Timmermans and Tavory (2012), the abductive approach "aims to find a middle ground between inductive and deductive methods," as it "conducts parallel and equal engagement with empirical data and extant theoretical understanding." This means that the researcher—unlike in classical grounded theory—does not claim to enter the field completely open-minded, but rather with prior ideas and assumptions (Thompson 2022). In the case of this study, these were mainly informed by earlier observations regarding the characteristics of LatAm SF films in relation to decolonial and critical theory on AI.

Theory- and observation-led ideas significantly influenced the coding process and the development of categories. To counteract an overly one-sided focus on prior assumptions, however, I opted for an initial round of open coding, during which both theory- and observation-driven themes, as well as other recurring patterns, were coded.[9] The rationale behind this approach was, as Timmermans

[9] Examples of theory-driven codes created in this process include *hierarchy*, *exploitation*, and *extraction*, which are considered key aspects of colonial AI (see Sect. 2). *Everyday life*, by contrast, is an example of an inductively generated code. It captures personal stories and anecdotes of daily experiences, as well as reflections on their role in filmmaking, which served as important sources of inspiration for the films—a recurring theme I had not been aware of prior to coding, but which became meaningful for hypothesis building.

and Tavory (2012) put it, "to remain with the phenomenon and try to form as many links and hypotheses as possible in light of our theoretically positioned knowledge." With this in mind, the material was coded in an intuitive and highly detailed manner ("word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph", Timmermans and Tavory 2012), with the goal of detecting the broadest possible range of aspects potentially connected to the cinematic visions. The aim of this process was not to develop exclusive or separate codes and categories, but to sort the material according to different logics. In this sense, multi-layer coding appeared appropriate, as it allowed for the consideration of specific interview passages in different contexts. Moreover, in some cases, the resulting overlaps inspired the linking of categories and the development of explanatory hypotheses. Consistent with the abductive approach, the combination of deductive and inductive coding enabled the recognition of prior ideas and assumptions within the data while preserving a certain openness to additional themes. However, as Thompson (2022) emphasizes, the main challenges of this approach—potential conceptual inconsistencies due to differing epistemological traditions and the analytical complexity of working with overlapping categories at different levels—need to be addressed through active engagement with the research process and transparency in the analytical steps, which I aim to demonstrate in this section.

The codes generated during the first round of coding were then grouped into superordinate categories that reflect the underlying logic guiding the initial coding. Most of these categories—*own work*, *AI imaginaries/visions*, *coloniality*, *decoloniality*, *AI attitudes*, *public discourse*, and *ethics/regulation*—arose organically from the research questions. Another category—*LatAm identity*—emerged from the open coding process. It encompasses those interview passages (and related subcodes) in which the filmmakers explicitly position themselves as LatAm, mostly as opposed to the US and Europe. Since issues of identity and belonging—unlike *(de)coloniality*—were neither central to the theoretical lens nor explicitly addressed in the interview questions, the frequency of identity-related statements was striking. The category proved fruitful for interpretation and hypothesis building, as it introduced an additional nuance to the analysis, complementing the power-focused lens of coloniality.

Lastly, a second round of coding was carried out using the final category system, which comprises 8 superordinate categories and 34 subcodes. Due to the limited scope of this paper, however, the category of *own work* and its six related subcodes have been excluded from the analysis, as they cannot be meaningfully explored without a deeper examination of the film plots.[10] Thus, the list of categories and codes considered in this paper (see Table 2) has been reduced to the remaining 7 superordinate categories and 28 subcodes, which form the basis of the analysis.

#### 3.5.3 Evaluation process and presentation of results

As Thompson (2022) emphasizes, "the duty of the qualitative researcher is not to present data as pages of transcribed narratives, but to condense, synthesize, and restructure it into meaningful information." In accordance with this approach, I further structured the information within each subcode by repeatedly reviewing the text passages through the lens of the respective coding logic, identifying recurring themes and plausible interpretations, and clustering the corresponding interview excerpts accordingly. This was done for each code in a separate Microsoft Word file, which was exported from MAXQDA.

For the sake of brevity, the presentation of results (see Sect. 4) is limited to the most salient themes and interpretations from each major category—particularly those most relevant to the key research questions. Beyond mere description, the findings from the subcodes are summarized and interrelated within each category, with the aim of laying the groundwork for the development of explanatory approaches (see Sect. 5). To represent the filmmakers' perspectives as authentically as possible, they are quoted verbatim whenever possible. Quotations from the Spanish interviews are given in English translation.[11]

Finally, the findings from the text analysis (Sect. 4) were synthesized into explanatory approaches regarding the filmmakers' visions and cinematic representations of AI (see Sect. 5). This was achieved by linking and contextualizing the findings across different categories. As emphasized in Sect. 3.5.1, these hypotheses provide tentative explanations that lack conclusive evidence and require further validation.

[10] The category *own work* provides relevant background for a deeper examination of the films and was considered in the previous film analysis study and corresponding publications (currently in progress). Although this category is excluded from the analysis presented in this paper, passages that were double-coded with both *own work* and other categories may still appear in the evaluation of the respective other categories.

[11] All translations are mine. I followed the common rule 'as literal as possible and as free as necessary'.

## 4 Findings: qualitative text analysis

### 4.1 AI imaginaries and visions

At the beginning of each interview, the filmmakers were posed the question how they imagined AI to look like, to function, and to interact with its environment, and how they translated these visions into film. For Jorge Caballero, "artificial intelligence comes down to data." In line with this narrow definition, in his short *La Paradoja del Arrow*, he conceptualized AI as an "artificial intelligence protosystem" that analyzes the protagonist's daily routines and makes suggestions for optimizing his actions using arrows and numbers. According to Caballero, the film hints at datafication and corresponding risks, "insofar as there are a series of data quotas that organize our lives." The animated short *Control Z* by Jehisel Ramos and Eri Pedrozo is also inspired by computational operations, as Ramos explains in the interview: by taking a special pill, people's brains are transformed in such a way that memories can be erased from their minds, just like data from a computer hard disk (e.g., when undoing an operation by pressing ctrl + z, as the title suggests). By contrast, the comedy *El Paseo de Teresa* is inspired by AI-based voice assistants like Alexa or Siri. For Dago García, the screenwriter and producer of the film, it was essential to imagine the AI Teresa as *someone* (rather than *something*) "who could answer, who could give advice." In the interview, he elaborates on the premises that guided the design of Teresa, who, in the film, is assigned to a Colombian family for beta testing by a US company: "First, it should not look like other any other device on the market; second, it should be credible as a device of artificial intelligence; and above all, [it should be] an object that could be dressed […] and cared for, and turned into another member of the family, another daughter." Taking the idea of an embodied, human-like AI further, Aldo Salvini, for his social drama *El Corazón de la Luna*, invented the "Yawarbot," a Peruvian version of a robotic superhero. Equipped with pre-Colombian ornaments and weapons, the Yawarbot acts as a protector for a homeless and psychotic woman in Lima. Unlike the human urbanites who disregard the woman's suffering, the Yawarbot appears whenever she needs someone to fight her inner or outer demons. Salvini characterizes him as "strong, […] a two-and-a-half-meter thing, made of metal, […] like a warrior." When asked about the Yawarbot's significance for the vulnerable woman, the director explains: "When I was writing the script, for me he was […] the savior. Someone […] said that he was a mechanical angel." Thus, in contrast to most of the other participants, Salvini in his film envisioned AI as an enabler of human dignity rather than a threat to it.

Alex Rivera's SF drama *Sleep Dealer*, on the other hand, does not focus on AI itself but on the human and natural resources that AI depends on. Here, Mexican workers are connected to a system through implanted nodes that transmit their labor to robots in the US, providing cheap labor without the need for Mexican immigration. Interestingly, this dystopian vision was initially inspired by a utopian one: "the discourse around the global village and the idea of technology connecting people across borders." (Rivera). Yet, as Rivera remembers, the utopia is overturned during the creative process: "I had this nightmare vision of a world of immigrants stuck on the South side of a militarized border wall, using the internet to transmit their labor to these first world markets. It was mostly intended as a joke and a kind of active political satire […]. But it ended up plugging into some real structural dynamics in our global politics […]." The director further comments on playing with visual metaphors of the human–machine boundary, which is paralleled by the US–Mexican border in the film: "I was seeing technology becoming closer and closer to the body. Every iteration […] seemed to be about removing barriers between the subjectivity of the person and their ability to express it in digital form. […] So, I was imagining a kind of bio interface where there was no, or little, barrier between the body and the machine." The technical enhancement of the human body—or its fusion with technical components—is an important theme in most of the filmmakers' visions of intelligent systems. In *Anomalía* by Sergio Vargas, wired connection is used to connect humans to a system that enables them to relive their memories. Jorge Rollano, the screenwriter, envisioned this system to be controlled via motion sensors: "We decided to go for acrylics, almost holograms, where the technology is controlled almost by touch […], in transparent, translucent spaces." In a similar manner, in *Jane* by Sebastián Plasencia, the protagonist's memories are uploaded via human–computer connection onto the cloned body of his deceased daughter, with the cables functioning as "a communicating vessel between the two […], a bridge between one thing and the other." (Plasencia).

The idea of human–machine fusion is taken to another extreme in *Obediencia* by Ricardo Sosa and *I am* by Jonathan Plaza. Here, the protagonists wear implants that constantly transmit data between their minds and the providers. As Sosa resumes, however, the chips are not deployed for the sake of human enhancement. Rather, "everything is designed to work for the purpose of surveillance." In fact, in Sosa's fiction, Colombian families are forced to produce computer chips and other hardware components at home, under strict state control. For surveillance purposes, the fabrication sheds inside people's houses are equipped with sensor technology that intercommunicates through sounds and lights, expressing Sosa's concept of intelligent machines: "This big screen, this control map, and all these lights

**Table 2** Category system: categories and subcodes considered in the analysis (hierarchical order)

| Categories | Subcodes | Examples (keywords) | Count |
|---|---|---|---|
| AI imaginaries/visions | | Imaginaries, visions, and representations of AI | 164 |
| | Human–machine relationship | Human–machine interaction; dehumanization through automation; cyborgization/robotization; technological enhancement of the human; human substitution; dependency/addiction; instrumentalization of tech | 76 |
| | Representation of AI | Computers; robots; wired connections between humans and machines; implants/chips; biotechnology; artificial humans; clones; cyborgs; smart voice assistants; representations of underlying infrastructures and human labor | 53 |
| | Control | AI-driven surveillance and oppression: control of territories, borders, bodies, thoughts, labor, and social life through AI | 43 |
| | Tech company | Tech companies as agents exercising social control: power and omnipresence of Big Tech; surveillance capitalism; data extraction; control over public discourse | 42 |
| | Future scenario | Technological utopia and dystopia; future of AI in filmmaking | 34 |
| | Regime | (Authoritarian) governments as agents exercising social control: AI-driven surveillance; state violence; oppression; exploitation | 25 |
| | Memory | AI is used to (re)create the lost and the unattainable; control over memory; memory as a defining feature of human identity | 15 |
| | Nature | Nature/natural life in contrast to artificial life/technology; nature as a place of refuge from tech-driven state control | 8 |
| LatAm identity | | Conditions of life and filmmaking in Latin America | 70 |
| | LatAm film identity and conditions | Specific esthetical and narrative approaches of LatAm SF film (as opposed to US/Europe); structural disadvantages for LatAm film production: budgetary constraints; lack of visibility; audience expectations shaped by Western SF conventions | 30 |
| | Socio-cultural-political background | Social, political, and cultural contexts that shaped the films: political crises; (armed) conflicts; precarity; climate; landscapes; popular culture; relationship between LatAm countries and technology | 30 |
| | Autobiographical aspects | Personal experiences that shaped the films: origin and heritage; formative encounters; training and profession; family history | 15 |
| | Everyday life | Everyday life and experience as sources of inspiration: anecdotes; personal stories; everyday observations | 11 |
| Coloniality | | Coloniality of AI | 70 |
| | Hierarchy | AI-related hierarchies between the Norths and Souths: difficult conditions for AI development; being users rather than producers; traditionally low status of technology in LatAm; limited access | 45 |
| | Capitalism | Capitalism as a colonial system: information capitalism; surveillance capitalism | 21 |
| | Exploitation | Labor exploitation in the Souths: AI-driven control over work routines; exploitation in hardware manufacturing; dependency-driven forms of technological enslavement | 18 |
| | Extraction | Extraction of natural resources for hardware production; extraction of data: data colonialism; beta testing in the Souths | 16 |
| Decoloniality | | Strategies for decolonization of AI | 37 |
| | Creative resistance | Denunciation of AI colonialism in SF films; decolonialization of arts and filmmaking through AI | 17 |

**Table 2** (continued)

| Categories | Subcodes | Examples (keywords) | Count |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Appropriation of technology | Adaptation of AI to cultural specificities of communities; reinterpretation of usage practices; pursuit of local objectives | 14 |
| | Resistance to coloniality of AI | Practices of solidarity online/offline; denunciation of tech colonialism; democratization of AI | 11 |
| | LatAm tech development and research | Increase government funding for AI research in Latin America; expand exploratory funds and innovation hubs; foster public engagement; promote AI competence and literacy among the general public | 7 |
| Public discourse | | Public discourse on AI in Latin America | 37 |
| | Discourse on AI | Assessments of the AI discourse in Latin America: perceived as nonexistent or insignificant; overshadowed by more urgent societal concerns; manipulated media narratives; limited knowledge-sharing by experts; lack of transparency in national AI strategies | 26 |
| | Discourse on ethics/regulation/governance of AI | Ethical discourse still in its infancy; limited public interest in ethical debates on technology; widespread perception of technological progress as inherently positive | 7 |
| | Role of film(makers) in AI discourse | LatAm films are not perceived as valuable contributions to technological discourse: limited SF production in the region; lack of reach and visibility; lack of public appreciation | 7 |
| | Instrumental use of AI in public discourse | Manipulation of public discourse (e.g., through social bots and deepfakes); AI as a tool to organize the flood of information on the internet | 4 |
| AI attitudes | | Personal attitudes toward AI | 31 |
| | AI in society and individuals | Fear of being at the mercy of tech companies and algorithmic control; fear of humanity accelerating its own destruction; concern about alienation and hatred in online communication; optimism about open-source technology | 22 |
| | AI in filmmaking/art | AI tools as a means to overcome structural injustices; perception of human creativity as not being threatened by AI; concern about the lack of meaning in AI-generated art | 14 |
| Ethics/regulation | | AI ethics and regulation in LatAm context | 22 |
| | Arguments pro/contra | Ethical guidelines as a basis for orientation and legal judgment; perception of regulation as ineffective and too slow; preference for individual AI competence over regulation | 16 |
| | Particular need for action | Social media communication; data privacy; rights of streamers vs. traditional TV; automated weapons | 12 |

floating […], it's like a technology that's alive." The chip in *I am*, in contrast, not only serves to control the user but also "facilitates […] general access to everything you need," as Plaza elaborates: "In fact, this device, this intervention chip, works not only as an entry to something, but it also generates a level of dependence." Likewise, Vargas characterizes the human–machine relationship in *Anomalía* as driven by dependency and even addiction: "It [the system] becomes almost like a drug for the people." The intervention of technology in the human organism—to the benefit of social control and at the price of independence—is also a main motif in *De Día y de Noche* by Alejandro Molina. Here, a serum is administered to the inhabitants of an overpopulated metropolis to program them as day or night people. At the same time, they are constantly monitored by an AI system operated by an authoritarian regime. As Molina puts it, in his film, "biological technology is a method of social control of the population."

Social control is a predominant theme in the directors' concepts of AI. As stated by Plaza, AI has caused drastic societal and political transformations: "It is as if power was changing location, and that power […] could now be programmed, and the discussion was about who programs it." Several filmmakers reported their sense that governments systematically implemented AI-driven systems to make citizens "dozier" (Plaza), to convert them into "somewhat

automated beings" (Molina), or "working machines" (Ramos). In their cinematic visions, AI-supported control is exerted by (mostly authoritarian) governments over all spheres of life, including labor, border control, politics, and human thought. In some cases, state control is so naturalized that the oppressed do not even question it. As Molina elucidates, his film's protagonists live in "a society of many generations already controlled […] that no longer needs to be monitored, as control is already very much within each citizen." To quote Sosa, whose short also touches on the capitulation to oppression, it is due to Latin America's long history of inequality that resistance has not always been an option: "The prevalent fear is of possible retributions by the state, […] a state that has always oppressed. We have implanted certain codes that are very difficult for us to get rid of, […] it is in us." When asked about the underlying ideas behind their cinematic portrayals of the oppressors, the filmmakers discussed various approaches. While Molina staged them as "gods," sitting on high, white chairs and deciding on people's fates from above, Sosa, referring to George Orwell's "Big Brother," associated them with the "eye of the condor." In his film, the condor, a national symbol of freedom in Colombia, serves as a metaphor of the surveillance state: "From the beginning of the production design we wanted […] to give the state a kind of identity. What the art director found was […] the sign of the condor as a metaphor that would represent the state and appear throughout the film." In Ramos's short *Control Z*, the logo used by the authoritarian regime to advertise the 'pill of oblivion' also refers to national symbolism: "It is associated with the [Nazi] swastika because it [the state] turns into a regime, a dictatorship, in which […] you disappear if you don't do what they say." (Ramos). Meanwhile, in *I am*, *Sleep Dealer*, *El paseo de Teresa*, and *Anomalía*, it is not governments but tech companies that exercise AI-driven control. In *Anomalía*, the respective corporation is even conceptualized as the film's "antagonist" (Vargas). The director imagines the company's staff as unhuman "androids," as "people reciting a protocol, a corporate speech, all the time, […] [making] their interaction with the customer very cold." And yet, as users become psychologically dependent on the service, they accept the rude treatment—as well as the collection and storage of sensitive personal data. The idea of users being at the mercy of powerful tech companies is partly inspired by the filmmakers' personal perceptions and experiences: "It's a little bit of what we experience now," Rollano states, "the omnipresence of certain corporations that are […] already part of our lives and […] we don't really realize how much influence they have." As Vargas puts it, these corporations are "enterprise[s] to which humanity is making itself totally vulnerable—while paying for that."

When asked about the notions of the human–machine relationship that inspired the cinematic representations, several of the filmmakers expressed the sentiment that AI, and particularly AI-supported online communication, prevents or complicates interpersonal relationships: "These algorithms generate walls that separate people," as Plaza puts it. Some directors also feel that humans are increasingly alienated from "natural reality" (Sosa) and "totally detached from nature, which has to do with AI." (Salvini). This notion is reflected in portrayals of nature as the antithesis of AI-supported state control (e.g., in *Obediencia* and *De día y de noche*, where the protagonists flee to remote rural areas, or in *Control Z*, where the state officials are swept away by a tsunami wave). In Salvini's and García's films, by contrast, the human–machine relationship is intensive, close, and human-like. Salvini recounts that at some point, he even imagined his protagonist to "fall in love with the robot." Likewise, García speaks of the AI Teresa as "a member of the family." For Plasencia, on the other hand, machines are not entities for humans to form personal relations with, but tools designed to help us transcend our limitations: "I think technology goes that way—creating those we've lost or the things we can't reach or wanting to heal some feeling or solve some disability." In this sense, as in the case of *Anomalía*, *Control Z*, and *Jane*, intelligent machines are presented as tools to access, recreate, or manipulate the past. With regard to generative AI, Salvini envisions AI to be a bridge between the past and the future: "You feed it [the AI], and it draws pictures of the past, pictures of the future. […] I sometimes wonder what would happen if AI had the ability […] to travel in time, and what it is actually doing is not drawing […] but bringing something from the past or from the future." This is just one of many ideas outlined by the filmmakers during the interviews that might serve as inspiration for future SF projects. However, as Salvini laments, most ideas are unlikely to be realized: "I would love to make a futuristic film […], but how do you do that here if you don't have the money?".

### 4.2 LatAm identity

Although the interviews did not include explicit questions about the filmmakers' national/regional (film) identities, most of them raised the topic on their own initiative, explicitly positioning themselves as LatAm—or as belonging to the Souths—and highlighting the challenges involved. Budget limitations were among the most frequently mentioned issues, especially by those participants based in Latin America: "We have neither the budget nor the production to do anything," Molina states. "Because it [SF filmmaking] is really expensive," Plasencia concludes. For the latter, the relatively low production of SF films in the region is mainly "a matter of budget and access to

technology." On the other hand, budget limitations have also stimulated a specific look, as Sosa points out: "There is a trend called retro-futurism which is the appropriation of certain past technologies in order to rethink, remodel, and reconstruct them so that they gain other types of functions." Plasencia also appreciates this approach: "The retro aesthetic has helped us find a balance by not having to create something futuristic that is extremely expensive but using things that we can get in a supermarket, a hardware store, or an old house, […] and adapt it to what we want to tell." The use of the retro esthetic can, thus, be regarded as a distinctive feature of the LatAm approach to SF.

In addition to low budgets, another obstacle for LatAm SF production has been the expectations of LatAm audiences which are strongly oriented toward US cinema. As Molina explains, US SF is so influential in Latin America that there is little openness to alternative esthetics and narratives, even from within the region. This might further discourage filmmakers from LatAm countries from making SF. As a solution, Sosa supports the idea of developing new, authentic approaches to the genre: "No one has come to say, 'Well, in Latin America […] we have this other concept, this other proposal.' But it must be addressed." As pioneers of SF film in Bolivia, the makers of *Anomalía* hope that their example will inspire future generations of Bolivian creators: "Maybe it helps them and gives them the courage to say, 'Hey, I can also propose something like this. I had that idea, and I can do something more.'" (Vargas).

As expressed by many of the interviewees, a particularity of LatAm SF is its proximity to everyday life, encompassing experiences related to social, political, and cultural contexts, as well as autobiographical elements. Examples include the filmmakers' perceptions of political crises and (armed) conflicts, social inequality and precarity, their countries' climates, landscapes, and popular cultures, as well as their family histories, work experiences, and formative encounters: "Our artistic representations are very much about the concrete problems of today […]. There is a sense of responsibility […] to tell not only our history but also our daily life, our most concrete problems." (Plaza). For Rollano, this characteristic of LatAm SF is a logical consequence of the social reality in Latin America: "I believe that art always reflects the environment in which the artist lives. In Latin America, there are a series of problems that are much more acute and with which people are in constant contact. In super developed countries, […] the problems they live with are different […]. So, there *are* different perspectives." According to Vargas, LatAm SF is strongly influenced by the artists' personal experiences and observations: "It is all born from anecdote." Therefore, their cinematic portrayals of AI usually do not project into a distant (or unattainable) future, but rather into the present, reflecting "a reality in function of its environment." (Rollano). In doing so, the LatAm filmmakers anticipate The Royal Society's (2018) call for AI narratives to focus on current technological challenges, whereas "the 'everyday' might be a fruitful source of ideas for new stories or narratives about AI and its implications."

### 4.3 Coloniality

Experiences of structural inequality and/or coloniality are likely to have an impact on AI imaginaries and visions and their translation into film. Hence, it is not surprising that representations of coloniality at various levels—including hierarchy, exploitation, and extraction (Amrute 2019) as well as capitalism (Couldry and Mejias 2021)—are present in LatAm films about AI. Accordingly, in the interviews, the filmmakers refer to aspects of hierarchy between the Norths and the Souths, particularly in relation to the (perceived or attributed) technological 'backwardness' of Latin America. For Molina, the latter is directly linked to coloniality: "Mexico is a conquered country […]. Since we are neighbors of the North Americans, everything that is technology reaches us directly. In Mexico, technology has a comparatively limited budget relative to other sectors. Let's say we are not—and have never been—a country with high ambitions in technology." Sosa also observes a significant gap in terms of access: "The first technologies or innovations always emerge in the first world. And here, in the third world, it takes a long time before they arrive." In his opinion, however, there is no need to rush and catch up with the leading tech producing nations. Instead, Latin Americans should focus on expanding their own strengths: "Science and technology at times don't seem to belong to us. So, what *does* belong to us? [René] Rebetez says that perhaps magic belongs to us. Maybe the ancient [indigenous] things and those we are losing as a society belong to us." Caballero and Salvini emphasize that the hierarchies produced or reinforced by AI stem from overall structural inequalities: "There are the deep-rooted inequalities that exist in all other aspects of our countries in general. And they basically have to do with access, but this is inherent to society itself, I don't think it is something only technological in nature." (Caballero). In Rollano's opinion, lack of access is also a limiting factor when it comes to representing AI in film: "Here in Bolivia, who has Alexa? Who knows, 5% of the population? On the other hand, over there in the US and Europe, it is much easier to imagine it. And it is even easier to think about what happens with Alexa. […] Here it's more difficult because here you don't have this kind of access."

Several of the filmmakers' works deal with AI-related labor exploitation. *Sleep Dealer*, for instance, hints at "massive AI systems being trained by the labor of workers in the Philippines." (Rivera). With reference to the harmful working conditions of click workers and content moderators in the Souths, the director notes: "These machines give the

illusion of being *labor-saving* devices. What they are, they are *labor-displacing* devices. […] These technologies are transnational; they're produced in transnational circuits. And behind the glossy veneer, there's always a ghost army of people whose value, whose humanity, has been expressed and captured in the production of these systems—hardware and software." Concerning the prevailing AI narratives in Western SF, Rivera critically remarks that these films "actively sideline the real social questions that robots pose, which are around […] labor and power—one group of people exerting power over another group of people through technology." It is in this way that the protagonists of *Obediencia* are subjugated by the government with the help of intelligent systems. Here, labor exploitation is inspired by the logics of neoliberal capitalism widespread among conservative or right-wing LatAm governments (Sosa). This is also true for *Control Z*, where social control is exercised by an authoritarian regime "designed to produce workers" devoid of memory and political will (Ramos).

Extraction is addressed in several of the interviews, mainly in relation to data extraction and related hyper-capitalist practices of Big Tech platform providers. Caballero, for instance, describes how "Amazon uses this data to […] offer you products that you had not thought of buying but that you will surely buy because it already knows you so well that it can even predict what you might buy in a month." Salvini reports on experiences with surveillance capitalism, too: "I have friends who tell me, 'Oh, I mentioned a thing, and I just got the advertisement for it.' Because obviously, the phones listen to you, don't they?" In this context, García criticizes the carelessness of most users who "deliver everything without complaining." These considerations underlie the central conflict of his film, *El paseo de Teresa*, in which a Colombian family receives an intelligent voice assistant from a US company that constantly monitors them—without their consent and without their suspicion. Hereby, the film implicitly engages with decolonial critique that has defined beta testing in the Souths by companies of the Norths as a colonial practice (Mohamed et al. 2020). Salvini is the only participant to directly address the issue of resource extraction in the interview. Referring to the massive mining of lithium in his country, he scolds: "And our country, like all the countries here, they mess them up, don't they? […] They want to take them [the raw materials], so they come, cause a damn chaos […], and it ends in a diaspora, an exodus of Peruvians, […] as it happened in Venezuela." *Sleep Dealer*, on the other hand, is the only film of the sample that deals with resource extraction within its plot. Here, the water of a Mexican river is dammed and commercialized by a US company.

In sum, the interviewees primarily see coloniality reflected in "all those logics of turbo-capitalism, of information capitalism." (Caballero). In their opinion, these dynamics are accelerated by AI. Capitalism is perceived as the main driver of technological development, while at the same time producing and reinforcing inequalities—and (invisible) victims in the Souths: "There is money, […] there is work. But there are people who are excluded. There are people who do not enjoy that bonanza and who are crushed by the system, right? Crushed and forgotten." (Salvini).

### 4.4 Decoloniality

Both in their films and in the interviews, the filmmakers express strategies of resistance against the coloniality of AI, which I understand as strategies of decolonialization. As Rivera puts it, "Operations of capture and alienation […] have advanced very powerfully on the planetary scale, but around the edges, there's always alternatives, hope, and resistance." He draws on examples such as "labor unions, whether it's collectives, co-ops, whether it's political discourse and solidarity," pointing out that "the formation of resistance […] has to be transnational to this transnational attack on our humanity." From Rivera's point of view, digital communication plays an important role in global solidarity, as it helps connect people and create visibility. However, in view of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, he stresses the importance of offline solidarity: "There's a digital element, but the movement doesn't really become powerful until it's in the streets. The streets still matter. Being together physically still matters. The power of being able to see each other with our eyes, hold hands, listen to each other; that's still a real weapon." The preference for offline communication is shared by several participants (such as Ramos, Salvini, and García), who express distrust or resentment toward AI-moderated online communication (for examples, see Sect. 4.5 and 4.7).

A frequently mentioned strategy for resisting AI-related global power asymmetries is to foster AI research and development in Latin America—to be less dependent on US products and to be able to inscribe their own ideas and values into the technology. "There is now a kind of hope for change because of the new [Colombian] government, which has promised to provide much more funding for science and technology," Sosa comments. Caballero is partly optimistic, too: "Recently, I have had the feeling that there has been an opening in universities, research centers, and independent professionals that are creating projects." In his view, AI even holds promise for overcoming access-related inequalities, as "technologies linked to neural networks are not so enclosed […] and are much more accessible than before." Thus, Caballero feels "that there is a kind of democratization." The most frequently mentioned strategy of resistance, though, is the appropriation of existing AI technologies for their own purposes and benefits. Sosa is particularly committed to this approach, especially when it comes to filmmaking: "I don't consider it a lost battle. […] I think it's not too late,

and there are creators […] who appropriate and adopt these technologies […]. So, let's transfer the stories we can create to these new formats."

Most of the interviewees see AI as an opportunity for LatAm filmmakers to become more visible and successful, as production costs can be reduced significantly: "For example, editing programs are now super powerful because they use AI to erase something or to put filters on the face […], a thousand things. So that also helps us a lot. As long as it is a help and not an easy way out, I think it's extremely good and totally valid." (Plasencia). On the subject of the underrepresentation of LatAm contributions in SF, he is confident that "accessibility of high-end technology […] is also helping to do more interesting things." According to Caballero and Sosa, the exploration of original LatAm approaches to AI in film is already reality. They point to trends such as "technoshamanism" (Caballero) and "community cinema […], where the communities narrate themselves, and it is not necessary for a foreigner to arrive and tell the stories of the other." (Sosa). Rivera argues that online platforms can be an important means to fight epistemic injustice. In *Sleep Dealer*, Luz, a former Mexican node worker who set up her own business, uses mind-uploading to share Southern experiences of migration and exploitation with the world. For Rivera, she is the film's secret hero, as her blogging alludes to the possibility of filmmaking to denounce and overcome inequalities, by "break[ing] those walls down, with stories, with images."

### 4.5 AI attitudes

In line with their predominantly dystopian cinematic visions, many of the filmmakers are rather concerned with the emergence of AI. Especially the older participants admit being worried ("I am very afraid of it," García) or at least reluctant ("I'm really bad at technology because I don't really get hooked on it," Salvini). Their fears concern "the replacement […] of emotions or of the human being" (Molina), "ending up in the hands of statistics" (García), or "continuing to destroy us—and doing it more precisely" (Salvini). Some are particularly alarmed by the pace of AI development: "This is a technology that advances by jet while reflection and law go by donkey," García comments, "it is so overwhelming […] that it doesn't give time to reflect and think." Other participants show ambivalent or neutral attitudes toward AI. Plaza, for example, reminds us that "a lot of people […]—and it's not bad—they just *use* their devices. […] And nobody cares much more." For Vargas, who argues in the same direction, it is crucial to recognize that "technology is born innocent." Correspondingly, Rollano states that "it's neither a villain nor a heroine. […] There are people who will use it badly, and there are people who will use it well. Technology will […] continue to create new possibilities and new limitations because everything generates pros and cons." Relating to cinematic representation, Ramos criticizes that AI is often misleadingly portrayed as external adversary of the human, "But it turns out that the problem is here [points to herself]. It's not outside, it's in us, and in our way of handling things."

Caballero is the participant with the most positive attitude, presumably due to his extensive creative work experience *with* AI—a field in which he can be considered a leading expert. For him, especially the emergence of generative AI represents a new era in the history of technology, "a point of rupture of that paradigm in which machines don't have to be totally destructive, but we may be able to generate other nexuses with those machines." In his filmmaking, he uses AI not only for image creation but also for film editing, "to organize, to compile, to search for semantic and syntactic relations, to classify images by movement." Caballero is convinced that AI will not replace the human creator but contribute to an "amplification and enlargement of what we as human beings can create"—as long as there is still a "human in the loop." Most of the other participants are not afraid of being replaced either: "I think the framing of a cinematic shot is yours, and an artificial intelligence won't be able to do it," Molina states. For Plaza, AI is "a tool like any other." Yet, in his opinion, "it's a good idea to use it with the responsibility of wanting to say something." This view is shared by Rollano: "Technology gives you a thousand possibilities. But if you don't have anything in your head, you're going to make pretty crap. If you're a [Michael] Haneke, you're going to do interesting things […]. If you're a James Cameron, you're going to make *Avatar 2*. It's that simple." For Rollano, AI is neither a threat to humanity nor is it a game changer. Rivera agrees that the impact of AI might be overestimated in recent debates. He believes in "the technology of *no technology*, meaning that the human bond between a family, between friends, between political allies […] is still the most powerful thing."

The participants' attitudes toward the technological future diverge. While some show rather pessimistic attitudes ("I think we are getting closer and closer to the *Terminator*, to be honest." (Plasencia); "Big Brother exists. They can't read your mind so far, but I think they will soon be able to." (Salvini)), others feel rather optimistic ("I've become more optimistic over the years." (Caballero); "Will technology play a role in that [positive human activity] in the future? I think, of course!" (Rivera)). It is worth mentioning that, in some cases, the negative attitudes toward the technological future seem to be rooted in experience-driven distrust in LatAm governments. Ramos, for instance, is convinced that the Colombian state is designed to produce uncritical, uneducated citizens to ensure that "all these things […] that go wrong […] remain the same and will probably remain the same in 2040." Pointing to past and present turbulence

in Peruvian politics, Salvini, in a similar manner, resumes: "I'm not very optimistic about the future, to be honest. Because from experience, right?".

### 4.6 Public discourse

The filmmakers unanimously evaluate the public discourse on AI in their countries as nonexistent or at least insignificant: "There is no debate on this issue. Sometimes you hear some isolated voices, but it is not a topic that is on the agenda […]. In fact, I think most people don't even know what they are talking about when they are told about AI." (García). Rollano, among others, explains the lack of discourse with a lack of access and public engagement: "Here in Bolivia, the knowledge of technology, the public debate, is still at an early stage compared to Europe or the US. We are going to accept the decisions that are made elsewhere. Because in the long run, we are dependent; we are not creators. […] The debate that can be generated here in Bolivia, and I believe, in Latin America in general, is a debate that Europeans would find boring because it is something that […] they have been debating for 20 years." According to the filmmakers, there are simply more pressing issues for their countries to discuss, such as "economic issues […] and energy ramifications" (Plaza), "the socio-political problems" (Salvini), or "to earn one's living" (Ramos). As Salvini sums up, "life in itself […], the day-to-day, is too complicated for you to be worrying about what might come with AI." In Ramos's opinion, AI is "a secondary topic for the majority of the population" because people do not feel prepared to assess the technological development: "Let's say, it's not something that's up to you to solve or think about." Another reason for the shortcomings of the LatAm AI discourse is the agenda setting of the mass media. As Salvini puts it, "You turn on a Peruvian news channel, and the only thing—the only thing!—you are going to hear and see are news of murders, robberies, and now the socio-political problems […]. Ah! And soccer news. That's it!" Vargas suspects the government of controlling media coverage on AI: "This is totally manipulated. […] I think obviously there are segments [of society] that study, that work, that know these mechanisms [of AI], but for the general population, we know what they want us to know." Likewise, Plasencia reports that the widespread use of AI-manipulated content on social media during the Peruvian elections has rarely been addressed in public debate.

Some respondents expressed that they would like to see the public discourse on AI to be more actively promoted by governments, the media, and educational institutions in Latin America. As Sosa criticizes, especially academic research rarely finds its way into public debate. Effectively, hardly any of the participants had knowledge of their governments' AI policies, as Salvini, among others, confesses: "I didn't know that Peru had a policy regarding AI. Nothing at all. […] But I think it's good, I wish they would make it public." As per the interviewees, AI ethics and regulation have not been topics in the public debate either, for which they offer different explanations. Plasencia, like García, believes that his country is not yet "at the point where it is debated whether it is ethical or unethical." According to García, people's low engagement with AI ethics is also linked to the fact that in his country "technology is assumed per se as progress, as evolution" and not as something potentially harmful. Ramos, on the other hand, believes that most of her compatriots are simply not interested in thinking critically about AI, but rather in analyzing the possibilities for immediate benefits: "New aircrafts, new weapons, tatatá!".

The participants unanimously assess their own impact as filmmakers on AI discourses as very low: first, because LatAm films lack reach; second, because audiences do not expect these films to be meaningful contributions to the AI discourse and therefore do not value them as such. "It seems strange that a cycle of SF films [on AI] is coming, and Bolivia is a promoter of this type of films," Vargas explains. In the same vein, García reports that *El paseo de Teresa*, despite its critical perspectives on beta testing and data colonialism, was merely perceived as a comedy: "In the film we tried […] to raise some questions […], but I honestly don't think anyone made that kind of reflection. […] Or at least I never heard anyone say to me, 'Hey, that's a good debate you raised there.' No, people told me, 'Hey, what a funny movie.'"

### 4.7 Ethics and regulation

Some of the filmmakers expressed that they did not consider themselves experts in the field of AI ethics and regulation and therefore could only give their opinion. Others had dealt with ethical questions in more depth. Caballero, who belongs to the latter group, criticizes the lack of differentiation in the debate: "What are we talking about? About the regulation of data collection? Of how data is collected? The processing of that data […]? The inherent biases within these databases? […] And each of these topics has ten sub-topics, and each of these sub-topics has an ethical and legal debate." Similarly, Vargas doubts that AI can be reasonably regulated, as there are separate levels of regulation that would have to be coordinated, such as "global regulations […], corporate regulations […], local political regulations […], and internal regulation of the collective conscience of the citizens, of their own use." Rollano is rather critical toward regulation, as it "tends to generalize, ignoring the particular case." He further argues that "whatever is done now […] will be obsolete in ten years." Rollano promotes AI literacy instead: "It is necessary to generate training programs for the common individual in the use [of AI], in getting the

best out of it, its advantages and disadvantages." Ramos, on the other hand, highly appreciates ethical guidelines and regulations because they provide "a legal basis for denunciation." As Plaza puts it, "At least there is someone responsible to whom we can later say, 'You murdered.'" To make AI ethics more effective, Plaza believes that ethics must be implemented from the very beginning, starting with the questions of "who is programming it, with what values, for what purpose." Plaza would recommend inscribing machines with more humanity, with "concern, reflection, and the possibility of adaptation, based on the encounter with the other." Assuming that there is a "transmission of ethical codes" from the environment to the human during his socialization, García wonders whether AI technologies "might at some point also acquire an ethic of their own," and thus raises the question of how this ethic would then have to be designed to ensure social behavior.

The area where participants would most like to see stricter regulation is online communication on social media: first, to prevent hate speech ("With social networks, it is easy to crucify any person." (Salvini)); second, to get rid of echo chambers ("For me, the best thing about the human experience is precisely meeting someone who thinks different." (Plaza)). Automated decision-making is another area of high concern, especially in the context of automated weapons (Salvini; Ramos). Regarding film production, García is particularly concerned with the unfair regulation of online broadcasting: "While television is subject to very, very strong legislation, the broadcasts of live streamers travel around the world without any kind of legislation." For Sosa, among many others, privacy is the most urgent field of regulation: "Our data is being commercialized to companies […], and we give away our data. […] I think that's where we have to start."

## 5 Synthesis of findings

Starting from the surprising evidence that the cinematic visions of AI prevalent in LatAm films differ significantly from those of Western SF, ten interviews with LatAm filmmakers were conducted and analyzed, following an abductive approach and combining deductive and inductive forms of coding and reasoning. The analysis provides initial insights that help illuminate the particularities of the LatAm films. These insights were generated at different levels—namely, the level of cinematic visions and the level of potential links to specific fields of experience, perception, and discourse—which I will attempt to connect and synthesize in the following.

First, the cinematic visions of AI appear to be strongly linked to specific socio-political realities and conditions of life reported by the filmmakers. This is particularly evident with regard to the (historical) experience of state control and violence, as well as being at the mercy of influential Big Tech companies and the capitalist logic they embody. As suggested in the interviews, it is likely that these experiences have influenced the cinematic representations of AI.

Second, most of the filmmakers explicitly positioned themselves as LatAm, or as belonging to the Souths, at some point during the interviews, highlighting implications for both SF filmmaking and their relationship with technology. In this context, participants also expressed a collective sense of Latin Americans being left behind in technological development, positioning themselves as users rather than producers of AI. In the interviews, they strongly connected this feeling to experiences of coloniality and/or structural injustices. This may help explain the specific power-related motifs and perspectives presented in the films, such as labor exploitation or data colonialism.

However, and third, most participants stated that their inspiration did not stem from decolonial theory on AI—which most of them were unfamiliar with—but rather from everyday life and personal experience. This provides a possible explanation for the fact that their films, unlike much of Western SF, do not project into a distant or unattainable future, but instead draw on current technological challenges that are adapted to their countries' historical and socio-political contexts. Precisely this strong engagement with everyday life can be regarded as a distinctive feature of the LatAm approach to the representation of AI. This approach is further characterized by the use of particular esthetic styles, such as retrofuturism, which are adapted to cope with budgetary constraints.

Fourth, contrary to what the predominantly dystopian scenarios in their films might suggest, the personal attitudes of LatAm filmmakers toward AI are quite diverse. Their predictions for Latin America's technological future also vary widely. While some foresee the continued triumph of hyper-capitalism and the collusion of authoritarian governments and tech companies, others recognize AI's potential to reduce filmmaking costs and to democratize technology through open-source software and coding. However, such positive notions are scarcely reflected in the cinematic visions. This challenges the likely assumption that their films might be strongly marked by the creators' personal views.

Fifth, among the aspects that the filmmakers view most negatively, AI-driven or moderated online communication stands out, which they consider disruptive and divisive. In contrast, they are surprisingly positive about the use of AI in film production, perceiving it as an opportunity rather than a threat for filmmakers of the Souths. These attitudes are reflected in the films, insofar as most of them deal with harmful human–machine interactions that show some analogies to surveillance capitalism and other threats

associated with Big Tech platforms, whereas the issue of AI replacing humans is not addressed at all.

Sixth, although the filmmakers acknowledge that AI ethics and regulation could be important tools for addressing AI-related challenges, most do *not* believe in their effectiveness in the LatAm context. On the one hand, they feel that their countries are neither sufficiently prepared nor interested in advancing ethical debates on AI. On the other hand, a general distrust of their governments can be observed among the participants, undermining their belief in the possibility of socially just AI governance in their countries. This distrust is reflected in many of the films, where abuse of power by governments is a central motif, while ethical or legislative measures to mitigate AI-driven threats are absent on the part of the authorities. Instead, the films foreground other forms of resistance to (colonial) oppression—strategies that may be considered (decolonial) alternatives to the distinctly Western paradigm of ethics and regulation.

Finally, the filmmakers unanimously assess the public discourse on AI in their countries as insignificant, just as their own impact as filmmakers on it. With regard to media discourses, they report relatively limited coverage of AI, which contradicts the assumption that such discourses could have had a major influence on the cinematic visions. Concerning their potential to shape technological debates through film, the filmmakers opine that LatAm productions lack the reach, and sometimes the appreciation, to be perceived as meaningful contributions by the broader public. In some of the interviews, this perception is directly linked to epistemic and structural injustices, such as budgetary constraints, which indeed influenced the films' plots and esthetics.

The study has offered initial insights that help illuminate the cinematic visions of AI in LatAm films in relation to the filmmakers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward AI and related discourses. Future research could build on these findings by evaluating their relevance and consistency in the context of other cinematic cultures of AI. A comparison between the AI imaginaries and visions identified in the LatAm films and those found in previous research also appears worthwhile. Much remains to be done to address the structural and epistemic injustices that limit LatAm SF production—and its visibility. In the academic field, further studies highlighting the perspectives of filmmakers from the Souths could make a modest yet important contribution to raising awareness and reducing these barriers.

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**Data availability** Data that support the findings of this study are provided within the manuscript in the form of tables in the Methods section.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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