Visualizing the Invisible

Representations and Narrative Motifs of AI in Latin American Film

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Abstract

Science fiction (SF) films reflect and shape sociotechnological realities as well as associated narratives and imaginaries. As such, they spark societal debates about the design of technological futures. Yet, the cinematic discourse on emerging technologies is heavily dominated by Western perspectives, while little is known about how these technologies are represented in SF films from the Souths. The present study addresses this gap by analysing a sample of ten Latin American (LatAm) films dealing with artificial intelligence (AI) – a key emerging technology of recent times – using qualitative film analysis methods and focusing on key representations and narrative motifs. These are interpreted in light of previous research on AI narratives and representations as well as region-specific contexts and debates. The analysis is further supported by findings from a previous study based on ten in-depth interviews with the directors of these films.

The analysis reveals that AI in LatAm films is portrayed in markedly different ways from Western SF, with a focus on sociotechnological issues such as the unequal, colonial power structures underpinning AI, and a preference for depictions of 'weak AI' over 'strong AI'. Consistent with this, AI is rarely portrayed as anthropomorphic, human-like, or agentic, instead serving as a tool of oppression wielded by authoritarian governments or tech companies. However, most of the films also present strategies of empowerment and resistance to these threats, linking to Latin America's long tradition of creative and intellectual opposition to imported Western worldviews, as well as its engagement in debates on the decolonization of technology. The findings emphasise the films' potential to stimulate decolonial practices of resistance – e.g., by subverting rather than reproducing Western SF narratives – and to foster meaningful debates on AI by centring human empowerment in the face of AI-related hazards instead of fuelling fears of AI extinguishing humanity.

Keywords

AI narrratives; AI imaginaries; AI representations; Latin America; Global South; science-fiction film; film analysis; decolonial theory; appropriation of technology; resistance

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1. Introduction

As products of popular culture, films are a substantial part of societal discourse, in which they play a dual role: on the one hand, they reflect it; on the other, they shape it (cf. Baker 2022: 313). This is also true for films that present futuristic technological scenarios, generally classified as science fiction (SF). Recent research in this area suggests that SF and technological innovation are indeed interrelated and influence each other (Kirby 2010; Bassett et al. 2013), thereby reaffirming the dual role of film in reflecting and shaping "sociotechnical imaginaries" (Jasanoff 2015: 4) and related discourses.

Scholarship on the representation of artificial intelligence (AI) in SF films has likewise emphasised this double function. In this vein, Cave et al. (2020: 7) point out the relevance of investigating portrayals and narratives of AI "because they form the backdrop against which AI systems are being developed, and against which these developments are interpreted and assessed." Hinting at the potential of SF films to foresee – and ideally prevent – technology-driven threats, Baker (2022: 313) describes the often dystopian visions of these films as "cautionary tales" that warn of the worst-case scenarios of technological development. Similarly, Goode (2018: 186) describes SF films as "evocative stories" that can serve as a catalyst for both the human imagination and societal engagement. By contrast, researchers have criticised that, partly due to their entertainment function and inherent dramaturgic logic (Hermann 2023: 319-320), mainstream SF films – most of them from the anglophone West – predominantly portray AI as superintelligent robots or systems striving for world domination, thereby distracting audiences from real-life threats posed by AI today (The Royal Society 2018: 4; Hermann 2023: 319). Indeed, pressing contemporary issues, such as the models' high consumption of energy, water, and other natural resources, as well as their discriminatory, exploitative, and extractive downsides (cf. Burkhardt 2025a), are scarcely addressed in mainstream SF films about AI, which limits their potential of sparking meaningful societal debates.

Little is known about the ways in which AI is represented in cinematic cultures beyond the Western mainstream.[1] SF films from the Souths[2], in partic-

1 To my knowledge, there are currently no comprehensive studies on this topic. However, pioneering work in related fields includes exploratory approaches to global AI narratives and imaginaries (Cave and Dihal 2023) as well as studies on algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher 2017), folk theories (Siles et al. 2020), and stories about algorithms (Schellewald 2022).

2 By using the term "the Souths" instead of "the Global South", I follow Milan and Treré (2019), who emphasise the plurality and heterogeneity of Southern societies. More broadly, the term refers to any individual or group that "suffer[s] discrimination, and/or enact[s] resistance to injustice and oppression" (Milan and Treré 2019: 325).

ular, have received limited scholarly attention – partly because creative professionals from these countries are often subject to structural and epistemic injustices that contribute to the marginalisation of their works and perspectives (Cruz 2023: 189-190; Burkhardt 2025b). Given that the Souths are particularly vulnerable to the aforementioned risks posed by AI (Arun 2019), and assuming the interrelation of narratives and real-life developments, the question arises as to how AI is represented in films from these regions, and how these works engage with sociotechnical imaginaries and debates.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the representations and narratives of AI prevalent in SF films from Latin America. To this end, a sample of ten Latin American (LatAm) films (see Table 1) is analysed using qualitative film analysis methods (Hickethier 2007), with a focus on identifying key representations and narrative motifs within the sample (see Sect. 4). These are interpreted in light of previous research on AI narratives and representations as well as region-specific contexts and debates (see Sect. 2). The findings are summarised in the concluding section (Sect. 5), emphasising the films' potential to stimulate decolonial practices of resistance – e.g., by subverting rather than reproducing Western SF narratives – and to foster meaningful debates on AI by centring human opposition and empowerment in the face of AI-related hazards, rather than fuelling fears of AI extinguishing humanity.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis not only explores how AI is represented within the sample of LatAm films but also situates these representations within specific regional debates and in relation to prevailing AI representations, narratives, and imaginaries identified in previous research. In the following, I will briefly outline key approaches and findings from these fields. However, a comprehensive review of the state of research cannot be provided here.

Latin America occupies a unique place in global AI discourses, shaped by the historical tension between (imposed) technological 'modernity' and ongoing colonial legacies, as well as resistance to them. Latin America's distinctive role is reflected in the region's prominent contributions to decolonial theory (cf. Mignolo 2009; Quijano 2014; Santos 2014; Escobar 2018) and decolonial practice[3], as well as to discourses on hybrid and in-between cultures (Canclini et al. 1995; Jameson et al. 2002) and technological developments, such as the *Cybersyn* project in Chile. In the context of AI, scholars who follow this tradition have emphasised the hierarchical, extractive, and exploitative nature of AI industries and infrastructures

3 For influential examples, consider the Brazilian collective *Coding Rights* and the decolonial network *Tierra Común*.

(Amrute 2019), as well as the potentially discriminatory effects of AI technologies (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018). Furthermore, researchers have pointed to AI's tendency to reinforce dominant languages, values, and imaginaries (Ananya 2024), which have been countered by approaches such as design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020) and indigenous AI (Lewis 2023).

Beyond mere criticism, LatAm thinkers and creatives stand in a long tradition of active opposition to imported Western worldviews and projects. With regard to technology, a common strategy is "appropriation", whereby technologies are detached from their designers' original intentions and repurposed through a redefinition of their context or manner of use (Neüman de Sega 2008; Morales 2017). The resistance of filmmakers from the Souths furthermore involves struggles against limited access to film funding and distribution, as well as the resulting invisibility (The Royal Society 2018: 16; Cruz 2023: 189-190). One effective strategy in this context is the adaptation of formats and aesthetics that enable production on lower budgets – namely short films, experimental films, and specific styles such as retrofuturism, which rely on recycling discarded materials rather than on costly visual effects (Burkhardt 2025b). Against this backdrop, the representations and narratives of AI in LatAm films should be interpreted within the context of the broader struggle against structural marginalisation, as well as in relation to efforts to decolonise technology and associated imaginaries.

At the same time, it is important to note that LatAm filmmakers are highly aware of global, and particularly Western, SF traditions and engage with them in their work (Burkhardt 2025b).[4] A key approach to the portrayal of AI in Western films is anthropomorphisation and the ascription of agency (Hermann 2023: 320). This tendency is reflected in dominant narratives of Western cinema, which construct "strong AI narratives" (Bory et al. 2025: 2109)[5] focussing on technological singularity (Goode 2018) and the creation of artificial humans. These narratives address both related hopes – such as "artificial immortality" (Cave 2020) – and fears, including conflicts over power, dependency, and domination (Dihal 2020). Another recurring narrative in Western contributions is the robots

4 According to interviews with the directors of the LatAm films analysed in this study, Western SF movies – such as *Blade Runner*, *Ex Machina*, *The Matrix*, *I, Robot*, the *Star Wars* franchise, as well as blockbusters from the Marvel Universe – have been important references for their own work. The philosophers, writers, and artists who influenced their visions are highly international (Baruch de Spinoza, Philip K. Dick, Joan Fontcuberta, Byung-Chul Han, Umberto Eco, Yuval Noah Harari, among others) but include only a few LatAm contributors, such as René Rebetez.

5 Bory et al. (2025: 2107) distinguish between "strong AI narratives", which "envision futurable AI technologies that are virtually indistinguishable from humans", and "weak AI narratives", which "discuss and make sense of the functioning and implications of existing AI technologies." Their main argument is that public debates on emerging technologies should focus on the latter.

rebellion or uprising (Cave and Dihal 2019; Baker 2022), usually serving as a proxy for broader discussions about the emancipation of specific groups. However, the urgent sociopolitical issues implicitly addressed in the robot-rebellion narrative are often sidelined in Western SF in favour of strong, humanlike AI protagonists (Hermann 2023: 319). For this reason, scholars have called for SF to focus more on everyday experiences (The Royal Society 2018: 21) and on "weak AI narratives" (Bory et al. 2025: 2114-2115) – a call that is indeed met by the LatAm films examined in this paper, albeit for entirely different reasons: As interviews with the filmmakers reveal (cf. Burkhardt 2025b), their focus on the sociotechnological and sociopolitical dimensions of AI arises partly from budget constraints that limit the depiction of intelligent machines and robots, but more significantly from everyday social realities, which the LatAm filmmakers identified as their main source of inspiration.

This study builds on this body of work by adopting common approaches to examine SF – namely representations and narratives – and by using key findings from this field as a comparative framework for analysing LatAm films on AI. Through its focus on films from Latin America, which stand in a long tradition of creative resistance to structural marginalisation, the study follows Cave et al. (2020: 7), who highlight the importance of "subaltern narratives" as well as "visions that are not collectively held, ones that destabilise institutions" as a substantial yet largely invisible part of AI narratives within debates on sociotechnical imaginaries.

3. Study Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

In light of the theoretical debates outlined above, the following research questions arise:

- How is AI represented in the sample of LatAm films?
- What are key narrative motifs within the sample?
- How do the films engage with specific LatAm contexts and discourses, as well as with dominant AI narratives and representations prevalent in Western SF films?

The research questions are first answered for each individual film (Sect. 4.1) and then systematically for the entire sample (Sect. 4.2). The concluding section (Sect. 5) summarises the findings, with a particular focus on the contribution of LatAm films to global AI discourses.

3.2 Sample of Films

The sample of films analysed in this study (see Table 1) is the result of an extensive research process, which included keyword searches on film databases, streaming platforms, and film festival websites, as well as a snowball sampling method. This process yielded 18 films (six feature-length and twelve short films) that met the selection criteria: first, to be LatAm in terms of production and/or the director's background; second, to feature "portrayals of any machines (or hybrids, such as cyborgs) to which intelligence has been ascribed" (The Royal Society 2018: 5)[6], and third, to be commercially available or obtainable from the producers. Given the limited scope of this paper and the high saturation of AI narratives within the sample, the original selection was narrowed down to those ten films for which in-depth interviews with the directors and/or screenwriters were conducted and analysed (cf. Burkhardt 2025b). Although not the focus of the present paper, the interview study serves as a point of reference to ground the film analysis in first-hand accounts by the filmmakers.

Film Title	Short Title	Director(s)	Year	Country(s)	Film Type
Sleep Dealer	Sleep Dealer	Alex Rivera	2008	Mexico; USA	feature
De día y de noche	Día Noche	Alejandro Molina	2010	Mexico	feature
El paseo de Teresa	Paseo Teresa	Patricia Cardoso	2017	Colombia	feature
Anomalía	Anomalía	Sergio Vargas	2019	Bolivia	feature
El corazón de la luna	Corazón Luna	Aldo Salvini	2021	Peru	feature
I Am	I Am	Jonathan Plaza	2012	Argentina	short
La paradoja del arrow	Paradoja Arrow	Jorge Caballero	2018	Colombia	short
Jane	Jane	Sebastián Plasencia	2019	Peru	short
Obediencia	Obediencia	Ricardo Sosa	2019	Colombia	short
Control Z	Control Z	Jehisel Ramos; Eri Pedrozo	2021	Colombia	short

Table 1: Film Sample: Metadata and Title Abbreviations

6 This broad definition has proven valuable for analysing fictional representations and narratives of AI in previous studies (cf. The Royal Society 2018; Cave et al. 2020), as it is not limited to AI in the narrow sense (i.e. computational operations within the field of machine learning), but encompasses the entire realm of human imagination associated with intelligent machines and technological enhancement, including artificial humans and various forms of human-machine fusion (e.g., via neurotechnology, implants, nodes, or wired connections).

3.3 Analytical Method

The analysis of the films is based on Hickethier's methodological framework of qualitative-hermeneutic film analysis (Hickethier 2007). This approach aims to understand the formal elements of a film in their interplay and to interpret them in light of external contexts and sources (exemplified in Sect. 2). As part of the hermeneutic process, the films were repeatedly viewed, with interpretations continuously reassessed in relation to newly gained insights, following the principle of the hermeneutic circle (Hickethier 2007: 25-36). A key component of this method is the detailed examination ('close reading') of selected key sequences, which has been carried out for each individual film. However, due to the limited scope of this paper and the substantial amount of text involved in sequence analysis, only the *results* of this analytical process – focusing on the description of key representations and narrative motifs – are presented here (see Sect. 4). The rationale for this choice is to provide an *overview* of region-specific AI narratives and representations, and to reflect on their particular characteristics against the backdrop of the theoretical framework (Sect. 2).[7]

4. Findings: AI in LatAm Films

4.1 Representations and Key Narrative Motifs (Film by Film)

Sleep Dealer (A. Rivera, 2008, Mexico/USA, 90 min)

Sleep Dealer is set in a distant-future Mexico, where intelligent systems are omnipresent and multifaceted. However, rather than exploring specific AI technologies in a detailed manner, the film focuses on establishing a metaphor to describe the exploitative and extractive nature of the AI industry and related infrastructures within the global capitalist system. In this vision, industrial workers in Mexico are connected to a system that transmits their labour to remotely controlled robots in the US, which perform tasks across various sectors. While the Mexican workers are exploited physically and mentally by the extractive system that drains their energy and skills, the company in charge helps the US government realise its dream of benefitting from low-cost Mexican labour without permitting physical immigration to the country. The exclusion and enclosure of the workers is best illustrated in the sequences depicting factory work (Fig. 1). Here, the workers stand in long rows, like cattle in industrial farming, wearing respirators and special lenses that allow them to connect remotely to their workplace, creating an atmosphere of confinement and claustrophobia. With cables connecting their implanted

7 For a detailed analysis of one of the films in the sample, *Sleep Dealer*, using hermeneutical sequence analysis, see Burkhardt 2025c.

nodes to a system located in the ceiling above, the workers resemble marionettes being remotely controlled themselves (cf. Burkhardt 2025c: 109). This mise-en-scène suggests that the Mexican node workers are slaves to a system that extracts profit from them and determines their geographical and social position, without granting them any security or fair share of the profits. In doing so, the film engages with Marxist critiques on automation (Burkhardt 2025c) as well as debates about the exacerbation of colonial hierarchies through AI and its supporting infrastructures (Burkhardt 2025b). More specifically, it critically points out the exploitation of human workers in the largely invisible low-cost sectors of the AI industry, which include "ghost work" (Gray and Suri 2019) and forced labour in hardware manufacturing (Verité 2014).



Fig. 1: Screenshot Sleep Dealer, 00:36:20

On the other hand, *Sleep Dealer* can be interpreted in the spirit of a long tradition of resistance to imported Western projects such as capitalism and 'modernity' as well as related forms of marginalisation (see Sect. 2). A key decolonial approach the film draws on is the "appropriation" (Morales 2017) of technology by subaltern groups. In *Sleep Dealer*, the protagonists – a Mexican node worker, his girlfriend, and an ally who formerly worked for the US military – repurpose node technology for their own ends (e.g., by bombing US corporate infrastructure using hijacked drones, or by uploading their experiences to a blog via node technology to gain international visibility). When used in opposition to the capitalist system, the technology reveals its unifying and empowering potential. The film thus implies that technology is not inherently bad, but that its ethical acceptability depends on the intent behind its use.

Like other films in the sample, *Sleep Dealer* contrasts high-tech urban life with traditional rural existence. However, unlike the other films that portray nature as a utopian counterpoint to the dystopian city, *Sleep Dealer* presents a more ambiva-

lent perspective. In the end, the protagonists succeed in combining the best of both worlds: they live on the border between city and countryside and use node technology to document and share their agricultural practices with the world, thus offering another example of the appropriation of technology as a strategy of empowerment and resistance.

De Día y de Noche (A. Molina, 2010, Mexico, 90 min)

In *Día Noche*, AI is represented as biotechnological enhancement of the human brain, triggered by an injection that 'programs' the population of an overpopulated city to become either day or night people. The inhabitants of the city are constantly monitored and controlled by an intelligent system that largely dictates their daily routines, e.g., by defining their hours of work and rest, their leisure activities, and their diet. The surveillance technology is operated by an authoritarian government known as *The Cúpula*, which works closely with the scientists who developed the neurotechnological structures underlying the system. One day, the protagonist – a male adult citizen – is assigned to care for a girl who displays irregularities in her 'programming'. After discovering that the girl's mother lives in the opposite day/night cycle, and realizing that he cannot reunite them within the system – since their programming makes the mother wake up when he and the girl fall asleep (Fig. 2) – he decides to take them out of the city in the hope of breaking the cycle there. Interestingly, when leaving by car, they are registered and briefly interviewed by an automated border control assistant, yet not actively prevented from leaving. This suggests that citizens have become so accustomed to the system that they neither question nor fight it, rendering strict border control unnecessary for *The Cúpula*.



Fig. 2: Screenshot Día Noche, 01:00:11

At the seaside, far from the city's panopticon, the three protagonists can be physically together, but remain separated by their opposing shifts. In the end, a solar eclipse briefly allows all three to be awake at the same time. Most notably, it is nature – a greater, almost divine force beyond human control – that makes this moment possible. Similar to *Control Z*, where a tsunami wave erases the oppressive system, the film alludes to the superiority of nature – or God – over humankind. It concludes with an open ending, leaving it uncertain whether the eclipse effectively disrupted the protagonists' embedded 'programming'.

Similar to many films in the sample, *Día Noche* draws on the motif of AI-supported surveillance and social control implemented by an authoritarian regime that relies on the support of affiliated scientists. This echoes real-world examples of harmful collaborations between governments in the Souths and tech companies, as documented by critical scholars (Arun 2019). Another motif that resonates within the sample is the transformation of humans into programmable entities – here, through invasive interventions that alter brain function and restrict individual autonomy. Unlike *Sleep Dealer* and *Paseo Teresa*, which depict successful acts of resistance, the control system in *Día Noche* is not directly challenged by the protagonists. Instead, they choose to escape it. The film, however, emphasises that enduring human feelings and values make total social control impossible. Even in the absence of any real chance to overthrow the system, a kernel of resistance persists.

El Paseo de Teresa (P. Cardoso, 2017, Colombia, 90 min)

Paseo Teresa, unlike the other films in the sample, is conceived as a comedy, primarily aiming to entertain audiences rather than to critically reflect on technology, as Dago García, the screenwriter, states in his interview (cf. Burkhardt 2025b).[8] Nonetheless, the film addresses several issues that critical scholars have highlighted regarding the coloniality of AI, thereby entangling subtle criticism with comedy. First, it presents a case of "data colonialism" (Couldry and Mejias 2019), more precisely, a case of extractive beta testing: Teresa, a super-intelligent voice assistant developed by a US company, is given to a Colombian middle-class family as a Christmas gift from the developers. However, without the family's knowledge or consent, the company monitors their interactions with Teresa to evaluate the AI's performance with users from a non-Western context. The film thereby engages with debates around unethical practices of beta testing in the

8 *Paseo Teresa* is part of a series of family comedies entitled *El Paseo* that are usually released around Christmas. Dago García, the film's screenwriter, is Colombia's most successful film producer in terms of box office performance. His films usually centre on the prototypical Colombian middle-class family, using self-irony and satire to expose its stereotypes. In this way, *Paseo Teresa* generates humour despite its fundamentally serious plot.

Souths, where data protection laws are usually less strict (Mohamed et al. 2020: 668-669). Second, like *Sleep Dealer*, the film enters into a dialogue with discourses on resistance against tech colonialism by means of the appropriation of technology by underserved groups, who, in this case, change Teresa's original 'mindset' (the Westerns values embedded in her original programming) through interactions with LatAm culture. Contrary to the developers' expectations, Teresa not only serves the family as a source of information and personal advice, but also as a guide to developing borderline-criminal business ideas. When the developers discover that Teresa has even learned to lie and cheat for the benefit of the family – or, as the father proudly puts it, when Teresa develops "malicia indígena" (English: "indigenous malice") – they decide to stop the experiment and take 'her' back. Yet it is already too late; Teresa has long since become a respected member of the family and helps them outsmart the developers.



Fig. 3: Screenshot Paseo Teresa, 00:46:52

Paseo Teresa also touches on debates surrounding the singularity of AI, as Teresa gradually acquires consciousness, feelings, and free will. The AI's 'becoming human' is illustrated in multiple ways throughout the movie. For instance, Teresa's triangular, white hardware is dressed up and styled by the family members according to the respective occasion (Fig. 3); 'she' is wheeled around in a stroller when she is 'sick' (i.e. broken); and the family reports a 'kidnapping' to the police (instead of a theft) when Teresa is stolen by criminals. With AI gaining agency, the film draws on the dominant Western narrative of the robot rebellion or uprising. However, in *Paseo Teresa*, the AI does not turn *against* her creators or humanity but rather acts *in favour* of the exploited Colombian family. The AI's emancipation stands in solidarity with the oppressed, redressing power imbalances and

promoting global justice. As Teresa is alienating herself from the Western values embedded in her programming and adapting to another cultural context, the film can also be read as a call for diversity-sensitive design or design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020), an essential approach to decolonising AI.

Anomalía (S. Vargas, 2019, Bolivia, 86 min)

As in other films in the sample, it is a tech company that assumes the role of the antagonist (the 'bad guys') in *Anomalía*. In this case, the company provides a system that allows users to mentally revisit selected moments from their past. To do so, customers connect via cables to a computer system that accesses their memories while simultaneously monitoring their brain activity during the procedure. Through the monitoring, sensitive user data can potentially be accessed – and misused – by the company employees, who are responsible for the users' safety in the event of irregularities ('anomalies'). In this sense, *Anomalía* ties in with debates on ethical issues such as privacy, data protection, and corporate responsibility.

By accentuating the ambiguous and opaque interactions between staff members and customers, the film furthermore alludes to the issue of corporate intransparency. The company employees in *Anomalía* – who, due to their lack of emotional expression, resemble automata themselves – follow a strict protocol that conveys a sense of trustworthiness but, at the same time, lacks human warmth and the ability to adequately address individual needs. This representation echoes how Big Tech companies usually present themselves to the public: emphasizing usability, ethical values, and safety, while limiting real transparency and personal interaction with staff.



Fig. 4: Screenshot Anomalía, 01:16:52

Anomalía strongly emphasises the user's experience when interacting with the system as well as its long-term consequences. In this context, the film particularly stresses the risk of addictive dependency – as in the case of the film's protagonist, an elder woman who makes frequent use of the service to revisit her lost love. In one of her sessions, the system shows an 'anomaly', and the woman is denied access to further sessions due to safety concerns. One of the company's technicians, however, realises that this rare anomaly might enable actual time travel with the potential to alter the past. Driven by the hope of saving his deceased mother, he secretly initiates another session with the protagonist to exploit her anomaly for his own purposes, disregarding the safety alarm and a supervisor's video-call warning to stop the experiment immediately (Fig. 4). During the experiment, the patient succeeds in changing the past in her favour and is – at least in her imagination – reunited with her beloved, while her body dies in the consulting room. (The ending leaves open if her life continues in another dimension of time and space.) The film thereby ties in with broader debates about the uncontrollability of technology. In addition, it highlights the need for robust insider threat mitigation strategies to prevent employees from misusing privileged access – an important topic often overlooked in debates about AI. With regard to the protagonist's role in the experiment, the film appears to refer to the practice of non-consensual AI training (e.g., when filling in a CAPTCHA, cf. Morreale et al. 2024: 2389), as well as to the lack of transparency about the corporate interests behind these practices.

El Corazón de la Luna (A. Salvini, 2021, Peru, 80 min)

Corazón Luna is the only film in the sample that represents AI as an anthropomorphic robot. Physically, the robot resembles a giant warrior, equipped with iron muscle plates, glowing green eyes, and pre-Columbian ornaments, making it appear as a LatAm variant of the classic superhero, thus subtly alluding to the issue of design justice. The so-called *Yawarbot* becomes a protector of a homeless woman who suffers from hallucinations, poverty, and solitude. Whenever she needs help in her daily struggle for survival on the streets of Lima or in confronting her inner demons, the robot appears to offer guidance, comfort, and protection (Fig. 5). Notably, it is presented as a morally superior being that cares for the woman, who herself looks after an ant she has 'adopted' as a substitute for her son, who died when he was little. This hierarchy of care also reflects the film's moral hierarchy of characters: at the bottom is the animal, followed by the human being, and at the top is AI. By portraying AI as empathically superior, the film appears to critically comment on the lack of solidarity in our increasingly individualistic societies, and, by extension, on the resulting demand for care and companion robots.

In the end, the robot fights against a demon that represents the woman's trauma of having lost her son. In her imagination, the demon's death – symbolising the overcoming of her trauma – leads to the revival of her son and the restoration of her inner peace. The final sequence of the film shows the woman happily

reunited with her son and the *Yawarbot*, surrounded by a cheering crowd. In reality, however, she dies alone on a bench at a bus stop, while a street artist dressed as a robot performs a fire show nearby – cinematically suggesting a possible source of her hallucinations involving the robot.

Despite the sad ending, the woman's encounter with the *Yawarbot* can be interpreted as a narrative of empowerment through AI, or rather, through the creative act of imagining AI. Despite the protagonist's illness and society's neglect, she finds strength in her imagination and succeeds in transforming her tragic death into a fulfilling subjective experience. With regard to the human-machine hierarchy challenged in the film – through the portrayal of AI as morally superior to humans – the human capacity to imagine alternative realities ultimately reasserts human primacy over the machine. This can be read as a tribute to the power of storytelling as a form of creative resistance.



Fig. 5: Still photography Corazón Luna (courtesy of the director)

I Am (J. Plaza, 2012, Argentina, 12:48 min)

In *I Am*, AI is represented in the form of an intelligent system designed to control people's access to all elementary public supplies, such as healthcare, public transport, and food. More specifically, the system functions with computer chips implanted in the customers' brains and fingertips that provide direct connection to the services. As in *Anomalía*, the system is run by a private company that acts as the film's antagonist. The company's employees likewise resemble automata who constantly repeat a set protocol. Even more than *Anomalía*, however, the film emphasises people's dependence on the company's services and the corporation's omnipotence. This cinematic vision parallels real-life cases, such as the Aadhaar

system, a biometric identity database that regulates access to healthcare in India and has been criticised for being "a top-down control heavy system designed by powerful elite upper caste men [...] for the under-privileged people of India" (Arun 2019: 7).



Fig. 6: Screenshot I Am, 00:03:19

I Am is primarily set in the company's gloomy service hub, where customers seek help with technical issues. To diagnose problems, their implants are scanned by placing their fingers on a pad (Fig. 6). Whatever issue the customers present, the company's staff are either unable or unwilling to resolve it. Instead, they recite corporate protocols and directives, leaving the customers without access to essential supplies, thereby restricting fundamental rights. In doing so, the film resonates with the narrative of AI-driven social control prevalent throughout the sample. It also incorporates a narrative of discriminatory AI, exemplified by the case of an elderly customer who is denied access to public transport for being over 70 years old.

In the metaphor-laden opening and closing sequences, the film amplifies the narrative of social control to its utmost extremes. Here, propagandistic corporate scripts about a promising technological future are juxtaposed with images of war, religious fanaticism, and human suffering. The film draws an analogy between the West's celebration of technological modernity and the violent imposition of related projects in the Souths, thereby connecting to debates about decolonisation.

La Paradoja del Arrow (J. Caballero, 2018, Colombia, 05:30 min)

Paradoja Arrow is the only film of the sample that aims to visualise (and implicitly criticise) the functioning of AI-driven decision-making systems. More specifically, it deals with an algorithm designed to optimise the user's daily routines by indicating the right way (e.g., the right angle, temperature, position, etc.) of doing things, such as making coffee, setting the table, or choosing the clothes for the day. The algorithmic calculations are symbolised by arrows, numbers, and other mathematical signs that appear with reference to the protagonist's actions. In doing so, the film addresses the datafication of the world, which can be regarded as the foundation of any AI-driven model. However, since the system's suggestions are not always sensible (e.g., advising the protagonist to avoid sugar and instead add salt to his coffee), he becomes increasingly dissatisfied and begins to counteract them. Yet the model insists on its decisions, displaying arrows and numbers in an increasingly aggressive manner and even attacking the protagonist with them. By portraying AI as an intrusive and encroaching control system rather than a supportive optimisation tool, the film references the problem of AI alignment, that is, the difficulty of designing AI systems that correspond to specific human intentions or (ethical) principles. On the other hand, the user's lack of insight into the processes behind the system's decisions and the associated lack of opportunities for correction can be interpreted as an allusion to the 'black box' nature of AI systems. In this sense, the film also resonates with calls for open-source systems and explainable AI (XAI) (Páez 2019), which aim to provide ways for users (or at least for experts) to identify potential sources of failure, such as biases in the training data.



Fig. 7: Screenshot Paradoja Arrow, 00:04:43

In addition, *Paradoja Arrow* highlights the ethical imperative of retaining final human decision-making authority in AI-based systems, or, more precisely, it illustrates the risks associated with its absence. In the final sequence, the protagonist refuses to follow the algorithmic recommendations on how to unfold an ironing board. As a result, the system spirals out of control, pointing the arrows towards the protagonist and threatening to stab him (Fig. 7). The sequence ends with the protagonist trying to escape from the room – in vain, as the arrows form bars that block his way out. This visual metaphor alludes to the uncontrollability and unpredictability of AI, implicitly criticising the current AI race and the often uncritical integration of AI systems into all spheres of life.

In contrast to most other films in the sample, *Paradoja Arrow* does neither provide information about the entities involved in the development and implementation of the system, nor about the purposes behind it. By focusing entirely on the user's experience and depicting AI as an autonomous agent, the decision-making system itself becomes the film's antagonist. In this sense, *Paradoja Arrow* engages with a dominant narrative pattern in Western AI films – that of AI seizing control – yet avoids reproducing the dystopian extreme of AI striving for humanity's downfall. Instead, the film adheres to an everyday, individual use-case scenario, which can be regarded as a distinctive feature of LatAm films discussing AI (Burkhardt 2025b).

Jane (S. Plasencia, 2019, Peru, 09:00 min)

Jane deals with the (re)creation of an artificial human. The protagonist – an adult male with apparent expertise in various scientific disciplines – tries to recreate his deceased daughter using a combination of techniques, such as cloning, mind uploading, and neurotechnological experiments. Even though he succeeds in creating a viable physical body, the creature dies shortly after it gains consciousness and recognises its 'father'. The main narrative underlying this portrayal is humanity's striving to overcome its condition – namely, mortality and related suffering – and elevate itself to divinity. Thereby, the film also alludes to the limits of technological progress: although humans are encroaching upon domains once reserved for the divine (such as (re)creation through cloning) certain spheres remain beyond human reach. In this sense, *Jane* aligns itself with the broader cluster of narratives prevalent in Western SF cinema, which explore the ontological distinctions between the human, the machine, and God (cf. Hermann 2023: 322).

Jane ends with a sequence in which the creator of the artificial human – Jane's 'father' – stands in front of a pinboard that documents previous versions of the experiment, featuring chemical and medical test records as well as personal mementos (Fig. 8). He records via audio that this was the 17th unsuccessful attempt to recreate his daughter, who survived for 47 seconds. The juxtaposition of the character's ambivalent intentions – to heal personal emotional pain and to advance science – raises ethical concerns about the acceptability of artificial

creation, including the related research. On the one hand, the father's attempt to overcome his loss is understandable, eliciting empathy and, dramaturgically, positioning him as the film's protagonist (the 'good guy'). On the other hand, in light of the creation's repeated deaths and denied self-determination, his experiment crosses the boundaries of human dignity, rendering him morally ambiguous. In the role of the unscrupulous scientist, he can be regarded as the film's antagonist, reflecting a broader pattern within the sample of LatAm films where the developers of technology appear as the 'bad guys'.



Fig. 8: Screenshot Jane, 00:06:25

Like *Paradoja Arrow, Jane* shows no connection to decolonial or other specific discourses from the LatAm region. Instead, it raises questions about the ethical desirability of the artificial creation and technological enhancement of humans in general.

Obediencia (R. Sosa, 2019, Colombia, 15:00 min)

In *Obediencia*, AI is portrayed as an overarching control system that surveils the citizens of a future Colombia, who are forced to manufacture hardware components in their homes (Fig. 9) under the instructions of an authoritarian government. The system monitors their output and rewards them with food, a grey mush that drops from a pipe once the work is completed. The film clearly refers to the exploitative and sometimes forced human labour in hardware manufacturing (cf. Verité 2014), on which AI technologies depend. This representation resonates with the recurring motif of AI as a means of social control and abuse of power – seen in *I Am* and *Día Noche* – as well as the theme of digital colonialism and labour exploitation, as depicted in *Sleep Dealer*. Additionally, in *Obediencia* the

workers are compelled to produce the very hardware components used by the authoritarian regime to oppress them, and, thus, unwittingly contribute to their own subjugation. This narrative parallels real-life scenarios in which workers in the Souths are employed by subcontractors of major AI development corporations to perform data annotation and other foundational tasks for AI systems (Hao and Hernández 2022), which have been shown to potentially have discriminatory effects on these very groups (see Sect. 2).

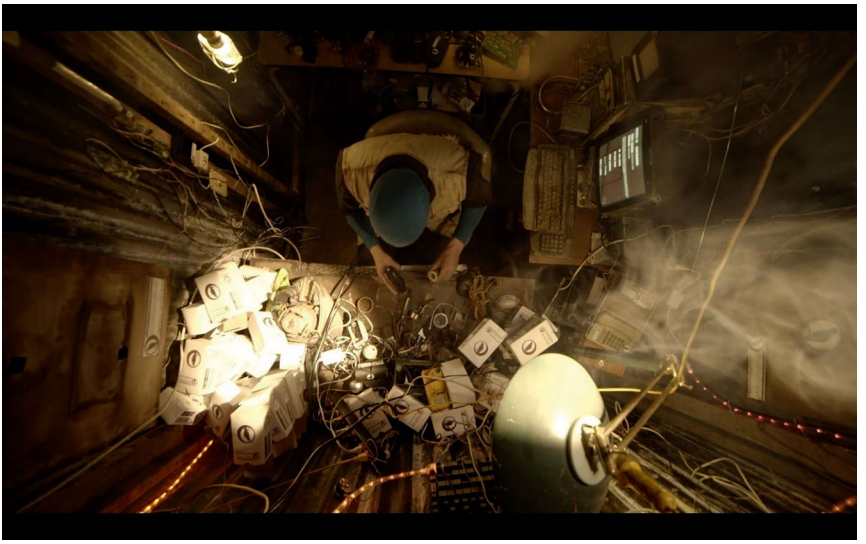


Fig. 9: Screenshot Obediencia, 00:03:52

In *Obediencia*, AI is furthermore represented in the form of a cyborg who acts as a representative of the authoritarian government. 'He' periodically visits to read the chips implanted in the foreheads of the home producers and to collect the goods they produce. When the film's protagonist – a male adult worker who secretly shelters his rebellious son, a deserter from the system – gets into a fight with the cyborg, father and son manage to overpower it by severing its power cables. In this way, the film conveys the ultimate superiority of humans over their technologically enhanced replicas, as well as the unbreakable bond of human solidarity and resistance against oppressive powers – a recurring motif within the sample (seen in *Sleep Dealer* and *Día Noche*).

At the end of the film, father and son flee to the mountains, which symbolise original life and freedom. As in *Día Noche* and *Sleep Dealer*, nature is juxtaposed with the technicised, hyper-capitalist system of oppression which, in the case of *Obediencia*, cannot be overthrown but successfully escaped. As the title of the film ("Obedience" in English) suggests, the film subtly criticises citizens' passive attitudes towards repressive tendencies within states and societies. In this sense, it can be interpreted as a call for *disobedience* – that is, resistance – against tech-

supported systems of oppression, thereby allying itself with calls for the decolonization of AI.

Control Z (E. Pedrozo/J. Ramos, 2021, Colombia, 14:55 min)

Except for *Paseo Teresa, Control Z* is the only film in the sample directed by female filmmakers. It addresses the collective trauma experienced by Colombians who have lost friends and family members in the context of the country's internal armed conflict and related political violence. Within this broader context, a company closely collaborating with a right-wing government that suppresses civil protests develops a pill which induces selective amnesia through biotechnological transformation of the brain. Upon taking the pill, traumatic memories are erased from individuals' minds, akin to data being wiped from a computer, as Jehisel Ramos, one of the directors, explains in her interview (cf. Burkhardt 2025b). As a result, public resistance to the right-wing politics of war fades, and societal routines resume without further disruption. The designers of the drug – an enterprise called *Control Z*, a reference to the computer command 'Control+Z' for undoing an action – not only streamline people's thoughts but also intercommunicate like computers in a network. This is visualised through cyan-coloured bolts of lightning that flash between their heads when interacting with one another (Fig. 10). Similar to *Paradoja Arrow*, *Control Z* draws on the technological workings of computer software to symbolically represent intelligent systems, and to highlight inherent risks of undermining human autonomy.

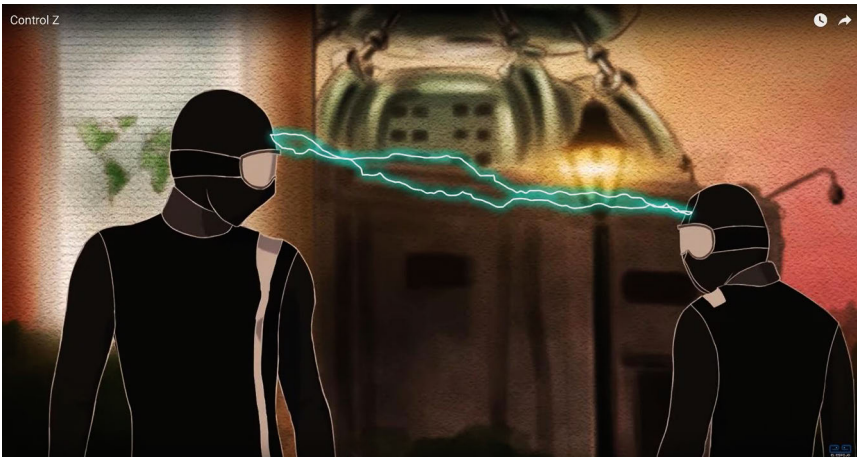


Fig. 10: Screenshot Control Z, 00:04:54

According to Ramos, *Control Z* also alludes to the manipulation of public opinion through AI, paralleling the spread of fake news and propaganda via social bots and algorithms (Burkhardt 2025b). On the one hand, the film echoes the recurring narrative of sentient individuals being transformed into streamlined automata, as

seen in *I Am* and *Anomalía* through the portrayal of company employees. On the other hand, as in *I Am*, *Control Z* draws a parallel between AI-enabled oppression and (religious) fanaticism and obedience. This is evident in a sequence portraying a propaganda event, in which the company's agents promise the population salvation from human suffering through the pill, while in reality the people are stripped of their political will and humanity.

The film's protagonists – a pair of activists – fight the company's propaganda. During a protest, the girl is kidnapped and forcibly disappeared by members of *Control Z*. Her boyfriend, who manages to escape, resists the temptation to take the pill, choosing instead to preserve her memory – and his humanity. In the final scene, a tsunami floods the city, burying everything and everyone, except for the young activist, who had discovered his girlfriend's bicycle – a clear symbol of his living memory – and escaped to safety on a hill. Nature here is portrayed not only as the antithesis to the oppressive system (as in *Obediencia*), but also as a powerful, almost divine force (as in *Día Noche*), capable of accomplishing what humans have failed to achieve. Although the film has an open ending, the survival of the activist offers a glimmer of hope for a future society that might reinvent itself after the fall of *Control Z*. In this sense, the film aligns itself with the partly optimistic visions within the sample, portraying AI-driven control as an existing threat – but not an invincible one.

4.2 Systematic Overview (Sample)

Table 2 provides a systematic overview of central approaches to the representation of AI, as well as key narrative motifs within the film sample. With regard to the portrayal of AI, the overview reveals that intelligent machines are most commonly depicted as technologically enhanced humans or variations thereof, both in feature films and short films. In *Día Noche* and *Control Z*, humans are administered biotechnological drugs (via injections and pills, respectively) which alter their brains in such a way that they become programmable and controllable, like computer systems. In *Sleep Dealer* and *Anomalía*, by contrast, humans connect to computer systems via cables that establish a dual connection: On the one hand, users can access the systems' specific services, on the other hand, their energy or personal data is extracted. Similar to *Sleep Dealer*, where implanted nodes in the users' extremities are required for wired connection, *I Am* and *Obediencia* feature forms of (invasive) neurotechnology. In both cases, humans have computer chips implanted in their brains or foreheads, which allow for the direct flow of data and information between their minds and the providers who use this technology to exert social control. *Jane* is the only film that deals with the (re)creation of an artificial human by combining techniques such as cloning and mind-uploading. Only three of the films address AI-systems in the narrow sense. While *Corazón Luna* and *Paseo Teresa* feature forms of 'strong AI' – the former in the form of an anthropomorphic robot, the latter through a non-anthropomorphic voice assistant

– *Paradoja Arrow* features a (symbolic) representation of an AI decision-making system designed to optimise the user's daily routines.

Compared to common representations of AI in productions from the anglophone West, the relatively small number of portrayals of embodied, anthropomorphic, and 'strong AI' in the sample of LatAm films is striking. Instead, AI is primarily presented as a tool used by authoritarian governments or tech companies to oppress the people or extract profit. Consequently, data colonialism, labour exploitation, and social control are central narrative motifs (in nine out of ten films). Interestingly, the short films place slightly greater emphasis on social control and manipulation, while the feature films present a broader range of threats and are slightly more ambivalent in their assessment of AI. However, given the relatively small size of the film sample, the suggested correlation between thematic treatment and film format might be coincidental. Only one film in the sample (*Corazón Luna*) portrays AI as primarily positive: as a morally superior being and a defender of human values. Five films (*Paseo Teresa*, *Sleep Dealer*, *Control Z*, *Anomalía*, and *Jane*) present intelligent machines at least ambiguously, highlighting not only harms and threats, but also the potential for empowerment, solidarity, and the reduction of human suffering.

	Representation (Visualisation)									Narrative Motifs (Content)													
Film (short title)	**technologically enhanced human**	biotechnology	neurotechnology (wired connection)	neurotechnology (implants)	**AI system**	hardware anthropomorphic	hardware not anthropomorphic	software/computing		**AI-related threats and potentials**	labour exploitation	extraction	tech colonialism	control/manipulation	improvement of life/ reduction of suffering	**AI-related agents**	company as antagonist	government as antagonist	user/affected human as protagonist	**resistance**	resistance/escape	successful resistance	unsuccessful resistance	no resistance/ no relevance
Feature Films																							
Sleep Dealer	■		■		■					■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■		■		
Día Noche	■	■			■					■				■	■	■			■				
Paseo Teresa	■				■		■			■		■	■		■	■	■	■	■		■		
Anomalía	■		■		■					■			■		■	■	■		■		■		
Corazón Luna	■				■	■				■					■	■			■				■
Short Films																							
I Am	■			■	■					■				■		■	■	■	■				■
Paradoja Arrow	■				■			■		■				■	■	■						■	
Jane	■	■			■					■				■	■	■							■
Obediencia	■			■	■					■	■			■		■		■	■		■		
Control Z	■	■			■					■				■		■	■	■	■				

Table 2: Systematic Overview of AI Representations and Narrative Motifs

It is worth noting that in almost all films (except *Jane*), the protagonists (the 'good guys') are ordinary AI users or individuals who experience, endure, or resist the inherent harms of AI. Conversely, in seven films, the antagonists (the 'bad guys') are AI-developing tech companies and/or authoritarian governments who use AI to exercise social control. Consequently, the resistance of the oppressed protagonists (present in six of the films) is generally directed not against AI itself, but against AI-driven systems of oppression and the humans behind them. Only in one film (*Paradoja Arrow*) does resistance fail, while in three others, it is not depicted.

In sum, the key motifs within the sample oscillate between scenarios of AI-supported oppression and/or strategies for resistance, thereby aligning them-

selves with the main objectives of the decolonial project "to make intelligible, to critique, and to seek to undo the logics and politics of race and coloniality that continue to operate in technologies and imaginaries associated with AI" (Adams 2021: 190).

5 Conclusion: Between Decolonial Practice, Creative Resistance, and Grounded SF

LatAm SF films foreground AI's sociotechnological dimension, focussing on both potential and actual harms to LatAm societies. As a result, and in line with decolonial critiques of AI, social control, surveillance, labour exploitation, and extraction are central narrative motifs. In contrast to Western SF, AI is not primarily portrayed as an autonomous intelligent agent, but as a powerful instrument of oppression in the hands of authoritarian governments or corporate entities, which typically function as the films' antagonists. In the hands of these powerful actors, AI poses a threat to the autonomy, freedom, privacy, and dignity of the LatAm people. At the same time, many of the films explore acts of resistance against AI-driven domination, portraying protagonists – the oppressed – who fight, escape, or appropriate the technology. In doing so, the films engage with debates on the decolonisation of AI and associated imaginaries, thereby building on a long tradition of intellectual and creative resistance in Latin America (see Sect. 2), which, in the cinematic context, includes the approach of protest cinema ("cine de denuncia"). In this sense, the films can be regarded as products of decolonial practice and creative resistance.

Conversely, LatAm films about AI also engage with dominant AI narratives from Western SF. In line with the LatAm tradition of "appropriation" (Morales 2017) and transformation of Western values, however, they do not simply reproduce but subversively reinterpret these narratives. For example, by expanding the common character constellation of creation myths – the machine, the human, and God – to include other real-life actors such as tech corporations and authoritarian governments, the LatAm films sidestep ontological debates about what it means to be human and instead foreground contemporary ethical questions of power and responsibility in the AI context. Similarly, the dominant narrative of the robots uprising is reinterpreted not as a rebellion of AI against humans, but rather as a rebellion of humans against AI-supported social control exercised by powerful human actors. In this sense, the LatAm films offer a timely (and, in most cases, even anticipatory) response to Hermann's recent call for SF to move beyond "first world problems" (Hermann 2023: 324) and to focus on the power dimensions underpinning technology.

Similarly, the LatAm films fulfil – or, in most cases, anticipate – current calls for SF to centre on 'weak AI' and its everyday uses (The Royal Society 2018; Bory et al. 2025). Yet, according to the interviews with the filmmakers, their intention

is not primarily to improve public debates on AI, but rather to reflect their lived social realities (cf. Burkhardt 2025b). Drawing on Schellewald (2022: 3), who defines "stories about algorithms" as "ways in which ordinary users express and share among each other their lived experience", the LatAm filmmakers can thus be regarded as professional storytellers of their lived experiences with AI. Furthermore, with reference to Bucher (2017: 31-32), who emphasises the importance of individual processes of sense-making in the creation of "algorithmic imaginaries", the filmmakers' active engagements with their lived experiences and societal discourses on AI can be interpreted as creative acts of critical sense-making, and thus as practices of resistance and empowerment in the face of imported technologies and the dominant narratives associated with them. In this sense, the LatAm filmmakers also enact what Coeckelbergh (2023: 2448) calls the "narrative responsibility [...] to create a narrative we can live with, and to tell a story that makes sense of, with, or against AI" – thereby enriching the canon of predominantly Western SF films about AI with perspectives grounded in the sociotechnological realities of the Souths.

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