

Hybridized, Glocalized and hecho en México: Foreign Influences on Mexican TV Programming Since the 1950s

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Abstract

Employing theories of cultural hybridization, this paper argues that Mexican entertainment programming – in particular the telenovela – is fundamentally hybrid, a finding that undermines its celebrated mexicanidad (Mexican-ness). The novela's history is traced, illustrating its global and local characteristics. It is also argued that, as the novela has attained a formal stability, its overt hybridity has diminished. Moreover, claims for recent regionalization, whereby producers adopt South American social realism or maximize exportability by universalizing their product, have been overstated. It may be useful to think of the telenovela as hybridized during its early development, but authenticated as a Mexican artifact since the 1970s.

If Mexican television ever had an emblematic product, scholars and the viewing public alike might well agree upon the telenovela *Los ricos también lloran*,^[i] which earned a ratings bonanza in 1979-80, scored again when reformatted for Sundays in 1986, and turned its star, Verónica Castro, into the most famous face in Mexican entertainment for fifteen years.^[ii] Further, if that product ever enjoyed an emblematic moment of success, that would surely be its airing in the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1992, when the 249-episode soap opera broke ratings records, its audience reported at 100, 150, even 200 million. Amply covered in the international press, the phenomenon has since been discussed as the epitome of a trend in global TV flows, first documented in the mid-1980s, whereby Latin American programming has come to be seen as an export commodity of economic and cultural significance.^[iii]

Missing from most if not all accounts of *Los ricos*' Russian triumph, however, is any record of the show's remarkably un-Mexican origins. In sum, the novela was produced by a Jewish émigré from Chile, adapted from a Cuban radio script, and, as an episodic melodrama designed for commercially-based television, bore the generic ancestry of a format developed for Mexican broadcast by Procter and Gamble in 1958.^[iv] The one scholarly analysis in English of the novela's success in the CIS emphasizes its apparent Mexican-ness to Russian viewers; for example: "Part of [the protagonist's] saliency as a cult figure can be found in her stereotypically visually marked "ethnicity:" a dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-skinned Mexican beauty" (Baldwin, 1995: 296). Ironically, this description itself betrays tendency to stereotype. There was nothing particularly "ethnic" about Castro; her medium-brown hair, famously green eyes and fair complexion (albeit a tad olive by Muscovite standards) are, in fact, typical of the "Western" look of telenovela heroines – an esthetic standard that marginalizes the 90% of Mexicans who are partly or wholly of Indian blood, reflects the Latin American tendency to associate whiteness with desirability, and indirectly enhances the exportability of such programs. This privileging of the small minority who are purely or primarily of Spanish ancestry further brings into question the mexicanidad ("Mexican-ness") of *Los ricos*.

The case of *Los ricos* in Russia points up an interesting paradox, in that what is widely regarded as a Mexican success story is actually an artifact of dubiously Mexican fashioning. The example raises questions about the nature of authenticity, the measure of mexicanidad, and the persistence of cultural imperialism. In turn, this episode points to the utility of considering *Los ricos* in particular and Mexican TV content in general as a hybrid construction, having roots in foreign entertainment programming and bearing the ongoing creative influence of non-Mexicans.

This paper aims to contribute to the debate over the challenging impact of globalization – a force or

tendency popularly seen in contrast with and opposition to forces of local cultural preservation and autonomy (Barber, 1992; Friedman, 2000) – by surveying the evolution of Mexican TV programming, a cultural and economic sphere that displays both globalizing and localizing forces, and the mixed artifacts that result, call them hybrid, glocal, mestizo, syncretic, or what you will. Prior to that, this paper aims to establish a theoretical basis for substantial Mexican cultural autonomy, by examining two important and relatively recent contentions: first, that globalization does not necessarily equate with Americanization or global homogenization (Robertson, 1995; Straubhaar et al., 2001; Straubhaar, forthcoming); second, and to some extent supplying the rationale for the first, that within a global economy that has become increasingly pervasive and institutionalized over the past two or three decades, there remains great evidence of and potential for agency at the local level (Bhabha, 1994; García Canclini, 1995).

This paper will resist the temptation to exaggerate the autonomy of local culture. The example of Mexican television reminds us that local agents are often forced to act by using or modifying tools that global forces have placed in their hands, and they are often circumscribed in their actions by globally-imposed constraints, some of these historical (e.g., structures of race, class and gender), some of them actual and ongoing (e.g., the demands of local and multinational advertisers and overseas program buyers). However, I will argue that examination of the evolution of Mexican programming strongly suggests that the cultural impact of global forces upon electronic media tends to lessen as media industries mature, reach economic viability and refine their products in order to maximize their local appeal. There comes a time when the hybrid artifact has become so popular, and so much the norm, that its very hybridity ceases to be perceived; the artifact may continue to absorb foreign influences, but there is no longer anything like a parity of internal vis-à-vis external forces, since it does so as an eminently Mexican product.[v] The primary thesis here – that Mexican programming is a hybrid product – must therefore be considered in tandem with a secondary thesis, namely that within such programming (and the telenovela in particular) hybridity diminishes over time.

Nationalism, Americanization and the Debate over Mexicanidad

Before entering the thickets of theory, it is worth pointing out that the latinoamericanidad of Latin American TV programming has long been a matter of great debate. With respect to an understanding of national origins and cultural values, there are commonly found three distinct views of such programming. One view, common within regional scholarship, accentuates the foreign values of Latin American productions (Trejo, 1985; Muraro, 1987; Oliveira, 1990; Mazziotti, 1996). A second, more common within English-language scholarship, emphasizes the Latin-ness of local productions (Straubhaar, 1984 and 1991; Rogers & Antola, 1985; Tomlinson, 1991; Reeves, 1993; Martín-Barbero, 1993 and 1995), although occasionally cases such claims are based less upon programs' content than on their success in displacing U.S. imports and in being sold as exports.[vi] A third approach is that of the broadcasters themselves, which have often celebrated telenovelas and other local productions in unabashedly nationalistic terms.

In Mexico, nationalism is a pervasive marketing tool. Historians have noted that Mexican nationalism is “epitomized by the amorphous concept of *lo mexicano* (the Mexican way [or, that which is Mexican]). Part official construct, part popular narrative, *lo mexicano* emerged in the 1920s as the organizing motif for a society devastated by revolutionary turmoil and in search of a unifying identity” (Joseph et al., 2001: 7f). Thus, the “images, language, colors, songs, and ultimately the martyred leaders of the vanquished popular revolutionary armies were appropriated, sanitized, and then celebrated with gusto by the victorious [middle classes].” By the 1930s, “Mexicans across class, regional, ethnic, race, gender, and generational lines were exhorted by their rulers to feel part of the new ‘Revolutionary Family’...” Such appropriations and exhortations created “a common discourse of national belonging, which was firmly in place by ... 1940. In the following decades, a shared mythology drawing on a pantheon of popular idols and icons ... helped unify the nation as never before in its history” [italics mine].

Given such precedents, it is not at all surprising that very often, in the hands of advertisers, that which is produced locally is trumpeted as such. For example, in recent years, campaigns for tequila have employed such phrases as “Nuestra tequila” (Our tequila) and “Lo mexicano” (The one that’s Mexican)[vii], while one supermarket chain declared itself “Una tienda muy nuestra” (A store that’s very

much our own). Similarly, the public is led to believe by broadcasters that nationally produced shows, particularly telenovelas, are intrinsically local products that bring Mexican values into viewers' home and that triumph in export markets.

The Azcárraga family's Televisa, the dominant broadcaster and operator of four national networks, has traditionally cultivated Canal 2 as its flagship channel (Fernández & Paxman, 2001).[viii] Since the 1950s, Canal 2 has been the principal vehicle for local programming, and as such it was initially branded as "El gran canal de la familia mexicana" (The great channel of the Mexican family). In the 1980s, the network was re-branded "El canal de las estrellas" (The channel of the stars), and, as its interstitial spots have always emphasized, these are Mexican not Hollywood stars. Non-Mexican programming is seldom if ever seen on Canal 2, which since the mid-1970s, perhaps earlier, has by far been Mexico's most-watched and most profitable network. Televisa's success as an exporter is similarly suffused with national self-consciousness. From the 1960s, when Televisa's novelas began to be sold in South America, through the 1990s, as these products conquered new markets like Russia, Indonesia and the Philippines, the showbiz pages of the Mexican press – which have traditionally depended on Televisa press releases and launch parties for the lion's share of their material – duly reported each advance. Typifying company triumphalism, a bulletin released on 8 June 1998 marked the 40th anniversary of its telenovelas, "the most widely seen in the world," and declared that the "the Mexican telenovela" (i.e. Televisa's own productions) had been exported to 128 countries (Televisa, 1998).

The above details merely scratch the surface of Televisa's role in forging a sense of national unity, pride and achievement, that is, in helping to construct the "common discourse of national belonging" noted above. Since 1930, the Azcárraga family has unabashedly lent its array of media to the service of the state: its variety shows bringing the diverse cultures of the disparate corners of the country into listeners' and viewers' homes, its newscasts serving until the late 1990s as a de facto ministry of propaganda for the long-ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), its telenovelas conjuring tears, suspense and joy shared nationwide, and its international sportscasts rousing nationalist fervor (Fernández & Paxman, 2001; Paxman & Saragoza, 2001). Altogether, over the past half-century or so, the nation-building function of Televisa in Mexico – a country where transport infrastructure and functional literacy for many decades lagged considerably behind that of industrialized nations – has superseded that of the printed word in constructing the "imagined community" of the Mexican nation.[ix]

By contrast, many cultural critics and scholars have in one way or another questioned the authenticity of this imagined community and tried to deconstruct *lo mexicano*. As early as the late 1950s, Televisa was drawing fire for being a purveyor of U.S. values, though the initial criticisms were directed not at Mexican productions but at its regular airing of violent imports, such as western and detective series (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 109f). Following the 1970 publication of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *Para leer el Pato Donald*, television encountered a new wave of critique across Latin America as a manipulative and/or stupefying medium, as was frequently voiced in newspaper columns (op. cit.: 209). Through the 1970s and 1980s, critics within Mexico's burgeoning field of communications studies typically viewed telenovelas and other home-produced shows as vehicles of a generalized Americanization of Mexican popular culture, through which values held to be foreign, capitalism and consumerism in particular, were unremittingly propagated (e.g., Trejo, 1985 and 1988; Martínez, 1989).

However, a good deal of this critique was prompted as much, if not more, by critics' political convictions as by any careful textual analysis of programs or gauging of audience responses.[x] As noted earlier, scholars writing in English (along with Jesús Martín-Barbero) tended to take a less confrontational view, particularly with regard to telenovelas. Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (2000: Table 1) have usefully charted the contrasts in analysis of novelas between these above-mentioned "critical" and "revisionist" scholars. The latter have tended to stress the actions and expansionism of local entrepreneurs rather than U.S. inspiration for and investment in Latin America's commercial TV arena; they have emphasized the growth of local production and export over the historical importation of U.S. content; they have pointed up the local roots of the novela's melodramatic tradition rather than the genre's much-alleged support of capitalism, consumerism and the social status quo; and they have contended that audiences are not passive, gaining only "illusory relief" from their telenovela, but active, engaging in a "creative decoding" of its content.

However, it may well be that some revisionists have overstated their case. As Biltereyst and Meers also mention, “critical” scholars have lately drawn attention to various cracks in the Latin American TV edifice: they note a new wave of U.S. participation in and export to the region (particularly in pay TV); they contend that Latin American values in telenovelas may sometimes be neutralized in order to make them more exportable; they speculate about a decline in export success; and they allege that revisionist studies that make claims for an active audience tend to obscure underlying power relations. For our purposes, the most germane point is the contention that local content may be altered to enhance export success, making for a new kind of hybridity (Mazziotti, 1996); I shall return to this point in the penultimate section of the paper.

Theories of Hybridity

This paper maintains as its primary thesis that programs produced by Mexico's broadcasters – entertainment shows in general and telenovelas in particular – are most usefully regarded as neither wholly Mexican nor culturally foreign, but as thoroughly hybrid in their construction, the product of a multiplicity of forces and variables. How may theoretical writing on the subjects of cultural hybridity and local agency in the face of globalization illuminate the evolution of Mexican TV programming? One can pinpoint at least four broadly distinctive approaches to this theme, those advanced by Nestor García Canclini, Roland Robertson, Anthony Giddens and Joseph Straubhaar.

García Canclini has done much to popularize “hybridity” and “hybridization” as keys to understanding Latin American culture past and present. Such terms he finds more useful than *mestizaje* and *syncretism*, due to the racial concerns of the former and the religious uses of the latter (1995: 11), although anthropologists and historians today often speak of “cultural *mestizaje*,” to identify those Indian peoples that have adopted the Spanish language and “Western” modes of dress. Hybridity, for García Canclini, refers to the mixing of discrete indigenous (native American) and non-indigenous (chiefly European) styles and traditions in the broadest possible sense. However, as he implies in a later reflection upon the utility of hybridity as a concept (1997), in the case of the electronic media – where the tools involved are as expensive as sound stages, cameras and mixing boards – hybrid cultural artifacts typically derive less from a mixing of the Amerindian with the Iberian than from a fusion of the designs and values of Ibero-American and Anglo-American entrepreneurial elites.

Several observations by García Canclini are pertinent to our discussion. First, there is no such thing as an “authentic” Latin American culture. Cultural artifacts, even those as “typically Mexican” as the indigenous arts and crafts found at markets all over that country, have all to some extent been molded by non-indigenous influences, including the demand for such things from tourists. Second, it is often the case that “hybridisations persist because they are fertile,” Latin American folk art and rock music being examples of this (1997: 23). In other words, hybridity is not a static state of affairs, a cultural landscape whose values and modes of expression are fixed – as post-revolutionary Mexico's conception of *lo mexicano* might suggest – but something with the continuous capacity to evolve and to absorb new external influences.

Third, modernity in Latin America, conventionally seen as an external imposition, influence or inspiration, is as much created locally as imposed from outside: “The history of how our exuberant modernism is articulated ... is the story of how elites, and in many cases the popular sectors, have ingeniously hybridised the desired modernity with traditions that they do not want to cast away” (*ibid.*). That is to say, there has often existed a degree of agency at the local level, a capacity on the part of Latin Americans to select those cultural artifacts and influences that they wish to absorb or fuse with their own and to reject others.

The term “glocalization” was not concocted by Roland Robertson, as the sociologist readily admits (1995: 28f). But he is responsible for shaping its scholarly usage, in defining it as a more accurate term for what is conventionally labeled globalization, which in his view involves “the simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local, or – in more abstract vein – the universal and the particular” (30).

Differing from the common view that the global and the local are opposites in conflict (Barber, 1992; et al.), Robertson finds an interactive relationship between the two. His concern is less with agency than with inevitability; citing John Tomlinson's *Cultural Imperialism* (1991), he argues: "'local cultures' are, in Sartre's phrase, condemned to freedom" (39). Regardless of the intentions of either global or local actors, global forces or messages will inevitably elicit differentiated local responses and outcomes. One of several examples Robertson offers is that of how ostensibly nation-specific cultural resources like the plays of Shakespeare are increasingly interpreted, staged and consumed differently around the globe (38). What is perhaps most useful about this line of reasoning is that it offers a compelling critique of the commonplace notion that "globalization = homogenization/Americanization."

Globalization therefore has an important implication for our understanding of Mexican television, which is that any external influence upon it, such as a blueprint for the commercial structure of the industry, the introduction of a new genre, or the airing of a U.S. series, will necessarily be met by a local reaction, remodeling or reinterpretation of the initial innovation. We cannot assume that any external innovation will be duplicated exactly, nor that it will replicate (or indeed be limited to) the degree of success that it attained in its home market.

Anthony Giddens' concept of structuration was not fashioned as an interpretation of cultural hybridity, but it can usefully be applied to the concept. Structuration is essentially a reconciliation of agency with structure, that is, of Max Weber's emphasis on how people (through their culture, their religion) shape society with Emile Durkheim's insistence that it is society that shapes culture (1984). To Giddens, this argument is a false dichotomy: agency and structure coexist. Structural elements certainly form constraints, but cultural agents operate within those constraints. Indeed, the very structural elements that limit agents' spheres of action simultaneously provide them with the resources with which to act and create.

Structuration can easily be applied to the television industry, a contested territory in which no single force holds sway. A TV show neither simply obeys the dictates of structural forces (a commercial broadcast arena, with its insistence upon ratings points and export revenue) nor merely reflects the values and intentions of its creators (the imaginative ambitions of its writer and producer, the creativity of the actors, set designer and composer). Executives, producers, actors, writers and viewers all exert an influence in the production process; moreover, commercial success tends to bring with it greater creative freedom – structure thus enabling agency. These attributes of the TV industry therefore point to another interpretation of hybridity, in the sense that hybrid cultural products emerge out of the interaction of commerce and art. Programs are created out of the interplay between the imperatives of the former and the impulses of the latter, a dynamic that may usually involve compromise but can also be synergistic.

In the case of Mexican television, it will be seen in the following section of this paper that many if not most of the commercial/structural elements of the industry are very much foreign in origin, while the artistic/creative elements are largely (and, over time, increasingly) local. It would, however, be reductive to equate commerce with globalizing strictures and art with local agency; some global elements (such as a new technology, an imported program format, or the involvement of émigré producers) may well foster artistic opportunities, and some local elements (the profit motives of network owners and executives, most obviously) ordinarily insist on commercial results. The interplay that is structuration therefore exists within both the global and the local sets of factors that influence production.

Finally, the work of Joseph Straubhaar and various associates on global television flows is useful for its critique (shared by Robertson, above) of the popular notion that globalization is merely Americanization (1991; Straubhaar et al. 2001 and 2003). Again, such thinking sees a hegemonic force, emanating from the United States through economic, technological and cultural channels, that finds a weaker oppositional force in local economies and cultures. Using empirical and statistical evidence from Western Europe, Latin America and East Asia, Straubhaar argues that the diffusion of U.S. programming (at least for broadcast TV[xii]) has actually been in decline over the last decade or two – and even since the 1960s in many larger countries, such as Brazil and Mexico – while local production has tended to increase.

Though he undermines facile claims for Americanization, Straubhaar does not discount a certain degree of homogenization per se. He contends that the existence of linguistically-unified markets, such as Latin (or Spanish-speaking) America, has become increasingly prevalent and thus illustrates a “regionalizing” trend, as opposed to a globalizing one. The principal aspect of this trend is that intra-regional television flows have been on the increase (2001, 2003).

A second important aspect of regionalization is intra-regional cultural influence. A former student of Straubhaar's, Omar Hernández, has shown how Latin American TV industries have long exerted an influence on each other in the creation of programming, starting with the export of Cuban radionovela scripts in the 1940s (2001). He further notes two recent creative trends: the fashioning of telenovelas with one eye on export potential, with particular emphasis on fellow Spanish-speaking markets, and, in the specific case of Mexico, the occasional production since 1996, by second-ranked broadcaster TV Azteca, of what he calls the “telenovela dura,” a style developed first in Brazil, later in Colombia and Venezuela, and characterized by social realism, as opposed to the less substantial and more predictable “novela blanda,” developed in Cuba and produced en masse by Televisa (2001: 83-5, 109-12).

The concept of regionalization therefore contributes to our understanding of hybridity in several ways. By highlighting the growth of regional audiovisual markets, it draws attention to potential influences upon Mexican programming and production from elsewhere within Latin America, through the importing of programs, the purchase of scripts, the design of product with a partial view to intra-regional export, and the incorporation of styles, themes and other creative inputs developed throughout the region.

Hybrid Origins: 1950-1972

The above outlining of theoretical approaches has already suggested incidentally that hybridity, in all its variations, has been a defining characteristic of television in Mexico since its inception. With particular but not exclusive reference to the telenovela, Mexico's most popular TV genre for at least the last three decades, I now wish to illustrate more precisely how hybridization, glocalization, structuration and regionalization – as these concepts have been articulated by García Canclini, Robertson, Giddens and Straubhaar – have shaped what Mexicans have seen and continue to see on the small screen.

Before engaging in the specific subject of programming, however, it is worth briefly noting that the Mexican TV industry itself, while modeled on the U.S. model of privately-owned and commercially-operated television,[xii] became a sui generis institution within a few years of launch in 1950. Whereas the U.S. model was predicated on three (initially four) competing broadcast networks and a highly fragmented ownership of broadcast stations, the Mexican industry by 1955 had coalesced into a monopoly.[xiii] In a clear example of glocalization, the Mexican government and private sector colluded in modifying a foreign mass media model to meet their specific local needs. They agreed to a revised commercial model, which by its unification of three broadcasters as a single enterprise would facilitate the propaganda goals of a single-party state and by its monopolistic structure would enable its loss-making backers to reach financial viability more quickly in what was, due to Mexico's relative poverty and unequal distribution of income, a slow-developing TV market (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 65-9).

There are several schools of thought regarding the origins of the telenovela and its immediate predecessor, the radionovela. Conventional wisdom within Latin America locates the novela's origins in Cuba, specifically in the pre-war radio industry. Academics tend to stress that the genre has its base in U.S. soap operas, those developed for radio by Procter & Gamble and other companies, whose daily serialized formats provided a blueprint for the Cuban radionovela; some step back further in time and emphasize the novela's literary roots, in the melodramatic and episodic fiction of 18th- and 19th-century France and England (Ortiz et al., 1989; Torres, 1994; Martín-Barbero, 1995; Hernández, 2001). Proponents of the novela's essential latinoamericanidad, if admitting some external influences, stress that the Cuban radionovela was always a distinctive genre due to the influence of local cultural traditions (Martín-Barbero, 1995; Hernández, 2001). Whichever position one may favor, García Canclini's discussion of authenticity, or rather his refutation of the notion that any cultural artifact ever possessed an authentic prototype untainted by external influence, should remind us that the quest for the Ur-novela is endless.

What does matter is the irrefutable fact of the telenovela's hybrid birth. U.S. multinational companies may not precisely have invented the genre that first appeared on Cuban radio in the inter-war years, but they certainly played a leading role in financing its production, creating an association between the genre and the advertising of household products, and introducing the format to other nations. This was self-evidently the case with the debut of the Mexican telenovela in 1958, when Televisa's Canal 4 aired the Colgate-Palmolive production *Senda prohibida*, branding it as "Your Colgate novela." Indeed, until the late 1960s, the vast majority of Mexican telenovelas – along with newscasts, variety shows and other genres – were produced and branded by the major advertisers themselves, who purchased 30- or 60-minute daily timeslots from the broadcaster, as had been standard practice in the U.S. TV industry in the 1950s (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 88-95, 164f).[xiv]

As was the case with the commercial model of the industry itself, however, U.S. innovation of and influence upon the Mexican telenovela was consistently compromised, limited and modified from the very beginning. That is, a genre already seen to be internationally hybridized during its early phase of evolution under U.S. guidance in Cuba, was globalized upon its arrival in Mexico, the inevitability of the globalization owing above all to the fact that Mexico did not import telenovelas from Cuba but produced its own. This process also constituted an incipient regionalization of the soap opera, in that the Mexican novela – like its South American counterparts – shared with the Cuban model certain key attributes that distinguished it from the U.S. prototype, chief of them a finite duration (initially of two or three months).

Still, *Senda prohibida* was introduced to Mexico as something of a pre-packaged product. Colgate was importing a serial format that it had already tried and tested in the United States and Cuba. It was not Televisa but the U.S.-trained staff of the Mexico City subsidiary of Colgate that produced the series and supervised its casting, and it was Colgate's local department of script development that oversaw the screenwriting process. Once *Senda prohibida* began to air, it was also Colgate that conducted viewer surveys, asking about tastes and attitudes towards actors and themes, in order to tweak the novela and maximize its audience, a process facilitated by the fact that this novela, like all in Mexico until 1960, was not taped days or weeks in advance but aired live. In other words, Colgate brought the full experience of years of TV production in New York and Havana to bear on its shaping of its Mexican serial. Procter & Gamble soon created Mexican telenovelas of its own, the two advertisers dominating the early years of production. Altogether, therefore, the commercial and structural parameters of this most Mexican of genres were to a great extent defined by U.S. companies (Op. cit.: 91; Trejo, 1988: 91f).

However, as Giddens' concept of structuration helps us appreciate, those very parameters established a new space for the exercising of Mexican creativity. Working within them were a host of local creative personnel, from the novela's screenwriter to its principal star and the majority of its cast. What viewers saw, and read about in the entertainment pages of the press, was therefore a recognizably Mexican production. Fernanda Villeli's script was notable in this regard. At odds with the reputation Televisa was to develop for conservatively-themed novelas blandas, [xv] the earliest Mexican productions were remarkable for their thematic daring. *Senda prohibida* squarely addressed the then-taboo issue of adultery, its plot a didactic critique of the common Mexican custom of the kept mistress (or *casa chica*) and its damage upon the nuclear family.[xvi] The second Mexican novela, *Gutierritos* (1958), centered around an honest and upright but unlucky man who is victimized by everyone, including his wife, and another production, *Teresa* (1959), featured a spectacularly manipulative and deceitful anti-heroine.

The mexicanidad of the telenovela derived in addition from the influence of the Mexican film industry. Mexican cinema, during its high-output "Golden Age" of the 1940s and 1950s, established a local audiovisual melodramatic tradition from which the novela borrowed liberally. To quote Martín-Barbero, who bases his observations in part on those of Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis: "The soap opera learned from the movies to use the melodrama to articulate any subject, no matter what it was: the connection of the national epic with private dramas, the displaying of eroticism under the pretext of condemning incest, the tearful dilution of tragic impulses, and the depoliticization of the contradictions of daily life" (1995: 279). The last of these points is perhaps easiest to exemplify. Golden Age melodrama, typified by the "Pepe el Toro" trilogy of films starring Pedro Infante, depicted a world in which to be poor was to be inherently noble and to aspire to wealth was undignified, and this pair of deeply conservative

assumptions has characterized the representation of lower-class Mexicans in telenovelas from the 1950s to the present (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 90, 96f; Saragoza, forthcoming).

The thematic boldness of the early Mexican telenovelas was not entirely without precedent, since many, including *Senda prohibida*, had aired in earlier years as radionovelas. Yet at the time, the Mexican government was becoming concerned over the influence of televised fiction and its potential threat to social stability, as was the Catholic lobby. They worried that such tales were hardly the kind of family entertainment that established role models for impressionable audiences. Concerns deepened as it became clear that, as already was the case in the United States, television would before long become the chief form of mass entertainment; its growing popularity in turn provoked Mexico's ailing film industry to join the attack (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 94f; Zolov, 1999: 89f). These pressures, together with Azcárraga Vidaurreta's own concerns about the moral content of programming, would result in a toning down of TV themes from the early 1960s, a shift likely prompted in part by the 1960 Ley Federal de Radio y Televisión, which prohibited content deemed contrary to public morality (*buenas costumbres*).^[xvii] For our purposes, the move towards thematic self-censorship only further illustrates how the scope and bounds of telenovela content were as much determined locally as imposed from outside.

As a further point regarding (Mexicanizing) agency vis-à-vis (Americanizing) structure, a word should be said about technicians. These tended to be Televisa employees, since as well as buying airtime from the broadcaster, advertisers would often hire its production facilities and personnel to make their novelas. One does not commonly think of technicians as a source of cultural distinctiveness, but in 1951 a Mexican engineer invented an electronic earpiece for instant communication with actors that became a standard and somewhat unique element of the Televisa production process. Performers could be fed their lines, either between takes or while taping was in process; as a result, the speed of recording was greatly enhanced. The invention had particular commercial and artistic implications. As a crucial element of what was to become Televisa's production-line approach to telenovelas, the earpiece contributed to the company's economies of scale and eventual reputation as the world's most prodigious novela producer and exporter. At the same time, TV critics would complain, it often made for lazy actors and poor performances; lacking an incentive to learn their lines and thus to think ahead of time about subtleties of character, actors needed only to show up on set, look pretty, and speak as prompted. The Mexican novela's ongoing reputation for cartoonish acting may ironically owe in part, therefore, to Televisa's early technological edge (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 149).^[xviii]

Finally, regionalization, in its various manifestations, is evident even at this early stage of the evolution of the Mexican novela. As noted above, Hernández (2001) records the export of Cuban radionovela scripts from the 1940s, and indeed such were used as the basis for some Mexican telenovelas from at least 1960. In addition, as early as 1955, Televisa set up a department for the export of its programming, which in the era before videotape took the crude form of kinescopes (films shot by pointing a camera at a TV monitor), and these were sold to stations in the United States and Central America (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 83).

The presence of non-Mexican creative talent at Televisa dates back even further. Owing to the emigration to Mexico of some 30,000 refugees during and after the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), the television industry (along with film, theater and radio) was well populated with Spanish actors, producers and technicians from the very beginning (op. cit.: 64, 84-6). Similarly, the 1959 revolution in Cuba prompted a second, if much smaller, wave of immigrants. *Senda prohibida* exemplified the resulting incipient pan-Hispanic TV culture at Televisa: its two chief co-stars were Spanish and Cuban. Behind the cameras, most prominent among Spaniards at Televisa was Luis de Llano Palmer, who served as Azcárraga's head of production from the early 1950s until 1971. Having earlier worked for MGM in New York, de Llano was able to inject some U.S. expertise into production procedures at Televisa. Indeed, Azcárraga often dispatched his chief technicians and producers to the United States for short periods of training.

More important still to the commercial development of the Mexican novela was a Jewish Chilean émigré by name of Valentín Pimstein, who began producing novelas under contract with Colgate in 1960. Within a few years, he would become Televisa's most consistently successful telenovela producer, and he would

remain so for three decades (op. cit.: 80f, 151-5, 261-4, 515f). Pimstein's successes, which include the above-mentioned *Los ricos también lloran*, are so numerous that a sustained study of his brand of telenovela rosa (or blanda) is sorely lacking. Consideration of Pimstein as a "foreign influence" within Mexican television might usefully adopt as a parallel Neil Gabler's study *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. Just as European Jews (or their sons) developed Hollywood cinema by constructing an idealized version of the United States, one that catered to the dreams and aspirations of the multi-ethnic urban and immigrant poor, so it might be argued that Pimstein constructed a utopian vision of Mexico – one in which fair-skinned Cinderellas from the noble barrio would find love with affluent Princes Charming – that gained similarly massive popular acceptance. The parallel may work further in that just as the universality of Hollywood cinema's appeal afforded it easy access to audiences overseas, so the universality of Pimstein's novelas enabled them to strike a chord with viewers as far afield as Russia. In each case, these creative visions appear to owe something to the "outsider" status accorded Jews in both cultures and a consequent wishing to belong (Gabler, 1989: 3-7; Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 152f).[xix]

At this stage, we cannot be sure whether the presence of foreign actors (who may have modified their accents) and producers was either readily perceived by Mexican audiences or utilized by Televisa's export department as a selling point. The regionalization of the genre may thus be said to have been more covert than overt during its early years. Within another decade, however, a visibly regionalized product was becoming common (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 147-69).[xx] By 1970, Televisa was well established as Latin America's pre-eminent TV studio, producing 20 telenovelas a year, airing three-and-a-half hours of first-run novelas per day, and (aided by the introduction of videotape in the mid-1960s) exporting novelas and other genres to 25 stations in the United States and 13 Central and South American countries at a rate of 700 half-hours per month. As Televisa's reputation grew, actors, writers and directors from all over the Spanish-speaking world flocked to Mexico City in search of work. Televisa's first major export success in South America, *Maximiliano y Carlota* (1965), boasted an Argentine actor and a Catalan actress in the lead roles, and when a Peruvian novela called *Simplemente María* became the pan-regional ratings success of 1969-70 (and a rare hit import for Televisa, which tended to limit purchases to U.S. films and series), its three lead actors were immediately recruited by Televisa. Although the relative sales of Televisa exports with and without non-Mexican stars is not known, it appears that there arose a "virtuous cycle," reminiscent of Hollywood's studio era, whereby Televisa's pan-regional success enabled it to attract the cream of Spanish-speaking talent, which in turn enhanced the exportability of the Mexican product.

While regionalization may be a somewhat amorphous term – as we have seen, it can be applied to regional program import, script purchases, program design with an eye on intra-regional export, and incorporation of regional creative inputs – each of its various traits were to some extent evident on Mexican television by 1970. (Of these, regional imports were the least important, due chiefly to Televisa's own production capabilities.[xxi]) Incorporation of regional inputs, in this case, refers not solely to the hiring of creative talent but also to the adopting of program styles or formats. Such may of course be said of the novela itself, due to its prior production in Cuba. It may also be said of the marathon weekend variety show, whose format a rival Mexican broadcaster – *Televisión Independiente de México*, known in the capital as Canal 8 – copied from a successful Argentine production (op. cit.: 182f, 186f). One of these efforts, the eight-hour (sic!) *Domingos Espectaculares*, formed the basis for Televisa's hugely popular and widely exported *Siempre en Domingo*, which ran from 1969 until 1998, functioning all the while as a Mexican and pan-regional showcase for singers and other performers from all Spanish-speaking countries.

Altogether, the first two decades of the Mexican TV industry witnessed many manifestations of hybridity. In the context of the debate over globalization and Americanization, the general tendency was a chiefly a glocalizing one, where "glocal" can be taken to signify that which originates externally or globally, only (or, as Robertson would have it, inevitably) to be refashioned internally or locally. Whereas the United States provided the structural model for the Mexican industry and whereas its companies were responsible for the introduction and initial production of what soon became its pre-eminent genre, Mexican agents swiftly adapted the model to their own needs and rapidly made the genre their own through the participation of local (and to some extent regional) creative and technical talent, the influence of local cultural traditions

(as manifest in Mexican cinema) and the onus of local commercial and political goals.

What the example of Mexican television in turn reminds us of glocalization is that it is a phenomenon incorporating a movement away from the global and towards the local (and later, secondarily and largely as a symptom of commercial success, outward again towards the regional). Such movement is further affirmed by the fact that, in a highly visible sense, U.S. influence upon Mexican television was fast diminishing by the early 1970s. First, Mexican broadcasters – Televisa and its soon-to-be-absorbed rival TIM – were airing fewer U.S. programs as their own output continued to increase.[xxii] Second, the broadcasters had lately assumed direct production responsibilities, displacing the advertisers – that is, Colgate, P&G, other leading firms, and the often U.S.-owned ad agencies that bought airtime and produced shows on behalf of smaller companies (op. cit.: 164f). Third, moves were afoot within the left-leaning administration of President Echeverría to reform the industry's commercial structure, so that it resemble the now part-public, part-private British model. In 1972, the state nationalized Canal 13, a bankrupt private venture, and sought to make greater use of the 12.5% of commercial channel airtime to which it was entitled under the terms of a 1969 regulation, with a view to creating a more high-brow kind of programming (180f, 213-7).

The Diminishing Value of Hybridity: 1973-1993

Having described the hybrid origins of the Mexican telenovela and the mix of U.S., local and regional forces at play in its early evolution, I wish next to focus principally on the years 1972/73 to 1993, which witnessed what might be termed the golden age of Televisa.[xxiii] During these two decades, the broadcaster functioned as a de facto monopoly – state-funded efforts to provide an alternative being maintained on several fronts but making little impact in audience share – and manifestations of hybridity tended to diminish.

Indeed, 1972/73 is a convenient watershed. These years marked the start of the company presidency of Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, the founder-owner's son, whose reputation for a hands-on management exceeded even that of Azcárraga Vidaurreta. Televisa absorbed TIM, thereby putting an end to private competition, and converted TIM's studios into a dedicated facility for entertainment programming, Televisa San Ángel, which enabled a greater annual output of production hours. Further, having vied during the 1960s with U.S. series and domestic variety shows, the telenovela now became Mexico's highest-rated genre. During the 1970s, it came to dominate the primetime schedule on the flagship network, Canal 2, as it does today.[xxiv]

That the pre-eminence of the novela was very much a Mexican (or Mexicanizing) project is demonstrated by its audience growth at the expense of U.S. imports and by its renewal as a vehicle for local rather than regional stars. The genre had traditionally "skewed" female and lower-income, but at Azcárraga's instruction a bolder-themed and often more eroticized version of the genre was developed in order to lure male and middle-class viewers to Canal 2 from Canal 5, Televisa's conduit for U.S. series. By making the genre more attractive to a wider demographic, and by airing it at the unusually late hour of 9 or 9:30pm when men were home from work,[xxv] Azcárraga reasoned that the ensuing demand for advertising space on Canal 2 would justify rate increases so large that they would more than compensate for any revenue loss at Canal 5. Begun in 1977 with *Rina*, a quasi-horror tale of a hunchbacked single mother, the late-night novela was an instant success and became a Televisa standard.

At the same time, Azcárraga began to cultivate a stable of local talent. Whereas earlier leading players tended to come to Televisa from the theater or film, or as established South American stars, the 1970s saw the company start to function as a star-making machine. On the one hand, Azcárraga prided himself on having an eye for talent (actresses in particular); for example, he personally managed the career of Lucía Méndez, arguably the leading Mexican TV star of the 1970s and 80s. On the other hand, the process took on a more structured dimension with the founding in 1979 of an in-house talent school, the Centro de Educación Artística (CEA); many Televisa stars of the 1980s, 1990s and today are graduates. It was in this context that, as noted above, Canal 2 ceased to be known as "El gran canal de la familia mexicana" and was re-branded as "El canal de las estrellas," those estrellas being very much Mexican.

The privileging of local over regional talent did not imply a loss of interest in the export market, however. In 1976, Televisa bolstered its 15-year old U.S. affiliate, the Spanish International Network (forerunner of today's Univisión), by starting to provide a weekly supply of up to 25 hours of programming, live by satellite. The following year, Televisa opened an office in Madrid in order to develop a European market for its product. Although overall export figures for this period are unknown, any loss of international cachet through the less-frequent use of South American stars was likely more than compensated for by the fact that Televisa was simply generating far more product than any other Latin American broadcaster, enabling it to offer buyers the most comprehensive packages of proven novelas or even forge affiliate relationships with foreign networks. Between 1975 and 1990, Televisa San Ángel grew in size from five sound stages to eleven and in annual output from 600 hours to 3,100 hours.[xxvi]

This is not to say that Televisa's industrial might rendered it impervious to all forms of cultural globalization. The Sunday variety showcase *Siempre en Domingo* gradually reduced its attention to indigenous and folk culture and increased the airtime it devoted to prefabricated teen groups, peddling derivative, U.S.-style pop. From around 1980, the fostering of such groups became a lucrative business, as the company cross-fertilized its variety shows with pop acts signed to Televisa record labels, staged at Televisa-promoted concerts and regularly featured in Televisa-owned magazines. While *Siempre en Domingo* would seem to merit its own study as a forum for the Americanization of Mexican popular culture,[xxvii] two caveats must be expressed. First, the history of popular music is replete with non-U.S. artists (many but not all of them British) who have made rock or pop "their own"; hence what an older generation may tend to regard as manifesting a pernicious U.S. influence may be seen by a younger, record-buying fan base as wholly local and "authentic".[xxviii] Second, and at a more overt level, a degree of mexicanidad was retained by Mexican pop artists from the outset by Azcárraga's personal insistence that *Siempre en Domingo* performers, and by extension all local artists popularized by Televisa, never sing in English.

As for the telenovela, its mexicanidad emerges as less questionable than that of *Siempre en Domingo*. The genre's most criticized characteristics – its saccharine flavor, Cinderella plotlines and consumerist subtext – did not necessarily make the genre any less Mexican, or more "American." Nor, indeed, did Televisa's admittedly racist tendency to use fair-skinned actors in all of its lead roles (and most supporting roles, even those actresses playing maids), a tendency that effectively marginalized the mestizo majority of Mexico's population. After all, Mexican cinema had perpetuated a similar approach to casting for several decades before the arrival of television. Although such racism has deprived Mexican novelas of a naturalistic element of mexicanidad, realism has never been melodrama's strong suit. This helps explain why a naturalistic representation of race is not demanded by most Mexican TV viewers (whose reactions to individual novelas have been surveyed by producers since the birth of the genre).[xxix]

Visible foreign influence upon the telenovela was in fact quite sparing. Pimstein occasionally embellished his novelas with styles and stereotypes from the U.S. mass media, hence Rina borrowed some stylistic elements from *The Exorcist* and a later novela of his, *María Mercedes* (1992), included a character modeled on Jessica Rabbit from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*; both of these films were hits in Mexico. Of longer lasting impact was the success of *Dallas*, which prompted a new generation of producers in the early 1980s to push for higher production values and greater use of locations and exteriors.[xxx]

Televisa reached the 1990s wearing its mexicanidad on its sleeve. Its quasi-monopoly position in the Mexican market, its claims to be the most prodigious producer of TV hours in the world (in any language), its more verifiable claim to be the world's leading exporter of Spanish-language programming, its novela factory at San Ángel and its star factory in the form of the CEA, both complemented by booming music and publishing divisions – these boasts and the prospect of expansion into new arenas formed the "story" with which Azcárraga and his Wall Street bankers promoted the company as it prepared to "go public" with an international share offering (IPO) in 1991 and again when it made a secondary offering in 1993. Indeed, President Carlos Salinas played a role in convincing Azcárraga to take Televisa public in 1991, keen that the United States, during negotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), should bear witness to Mexican entrepreneurial achievement. On both occasions the investment

community and the press bought the story, one of success hecho en México (“made in Mexico”), and the offerings raised large sums of capital (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 434-43, 478).[xxxii]

If I dwell on the subject of perception, it is because Televisa’s image as a successful Mexican company was predicated above all on the perceived success and mexicanidad of its products, chief of which – in revenue-generation, at home and abroad – were its telenovelas.[xxxiii] Critics might assail these programs as vehicles for the “U.S. values” of consumerism (Trejo, 1985 and 1988; etc.), a critique I shall sidestep on the grounds that it is too politically charged and too broad in its implications for brief consideration.[xxxiii] However, to the casual or even regular viewer, their actual content (stars, language, themes, locations) could hardly be described as un-Mexican. Public perception of the novela as an intrinsically Mexican product was further shaped by two factors: first, as discussed earlier, the mexicanidad of Televisa programming was routinely proclaimed by the company’s on-screen and off-screen publicity machine; second, the all-Mexican line up of novela-heavy Canal 2 was put into sharp relief by the early development of Canal 5 as a conduit for U.S. content (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 164, 234).

None of this is to temper my above argument for hybridity within the origins and early development of the Mexican novela, but it is to suggest that there may be a chronological limit to the usefulness of “hybrid” as an analytical descriptor. The hybrid artifact of the Mexican telenovela in 1958 underwent a period of experimentation and modification, but by the early or mid-1970s a commercially and artistically stable Mexican model had emerged – indeed, so stable as to be automatically self-reproducing, for a large number of Televisa’s biggest hits over the ensuing decades have been new versions of old telenovelas.[xxxiv] Moreover, overt signs of hybridity – direct association with Colgate toothpaste or Palmolive soap, the frequent presence of foreign actors as protagonists – disappeared during the 1970s. Further, whereas García Canclini claims that “hybridisations persist because they are fertile [that is, evolving and absorbing new influences]” (1997: 23), the Mexican novela fits uncomfortably with this contention, given that its persistence seems to owe much to its formulaic stability.

In sum, one may argue, the Mexican novela began life as a hybridized melodramatic genre – part-U.S., part-Cuban, part-European, part-South American, part-Mexican – but it matured to the extent that it became an authenticated Mexican artifact. Bearing in mind García-Canclini’s critique of authenticity, it is of course important to distinguish “authenticated” from “authentic,” the former being a term that acknowledges a (subjective) process at work. To clarify and draw together the arguments detailed above, this process of authentication is evident in three interlinked arenas, combining local agency at the level of production, local branding (on-screen and off) at the stage of transmission, and local affirmation at the level of reception.

Hybridity Resurgent?: The Past Decade

Have events of the past ten years – with the emergence of TV Azteca as a second telenovela producer, and with the proliferation of regional competitors in the novela export arena – changed the apparent stability, or authenticated nature, of the Mexican novela?

Much has been written about the revitalizing impact of TV Azteca upon the Mexican broadcast landscape in general and upon the genre of the telenovela in particular (Sinclair, 1999; Wilkinson et al., 2000; Hernández & McAnany, 2001). Academics and journalists alike have paid particular attention to the Azteca novelas *Nada personal* (1996-97) and *Mirada de mujer* (1997-98), which respectively explored the taboo themes of political corruption and love affairs between married women and younger men, doing so with an unusually naturalistic attention to performance, dialogue, sets and the portrayal of violence, and bringing (in the words of Time) “more explicit Brazilian-style TV sex to Mexico” (Epstein & Padgett, 1997: 39).

Regional influence indeed had much to do with this. Novelas from Venezuela (e.g. *Por estas calles*, 1992-94) and Colombia (e.g. *Café con aroma de mujer*, 1994), whose marked degree of social realism earned them high domestic ratings, had a profound impact on the Azteca productions, or more accurately upon the writers and producers at Argos – the independent firm that produced both *Nada* and *Mirada*

under contract – some of whom had worked in these two countries (Paxman, 1997a; Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 544-6; Hernández, 2001: 185f).

These novelas in turn encouraged some writers and producers at Televisa to shift towards social realism and broach taboos. *La jaula de oro* (1997) dealt with spousal abuse and sex within marriage, including a memorable scene in which a female psychiatrist (divorced, but drawn sympathetically) lectures the heroine's conservative aunt on a woman's right to an orgasm, marking the first use of the O-word in a Mexican novela. *Pueblo chico, infierno grande* (1997) depicted the now 40-something Verónica Castro (one-time Cinderella of *Los ricos también lloran*) displaying unprecedented amounts of flesh as she woos a man half her age (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 559, 573; Epstein & Padgett, 1997: 40).

It would therefore be appropriate to talk about a certain regionalizing influence upon the Mexican novela in the mid-to-late 1990s. An irony of this form of regionalization, therefore, is that South American cultural influences have in some ways elicited a greater mexicanidad, in that they have prompted producers towards a more naturalistic representation of contemporary Mexican lifestyles and social problems.

However, the impact of this regionalizing influence has been overstated. For one thing, a bias against Televisa (deeply ingrained in the journalistic culture of Mexico, given the firm's lengthy affiliation with the quasi-dictatorial, long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI) seems to have led press reports (and some scholars) to inflate the success of Azteca's novelas.[xxxv] Second, reporters and academics alike have at times confused ratings for Mexico City with nationwide figures; *Nada* and *Mirada* both performed much better in the relatively liberal capital than in the staid provinces – in conservative Monterrey, *Mirada* was a flop – so overall ratings for both paled in comparison with leading Televisa fare.[xxxvi] Third, with a few exceptions, Azteca novelas have failed to live up to their early promise. In recent years it has been common to find, even in the ratings for Mexico City (printed monthly by trade magazine *Adcebra*), Azteca's top novela on a par with Televisa's weakest. A falling out and resultant contract termination between Azteca and Argos in 2000 did not help matters (Hernández, 2001: 211).

Finally, Televisa's move in the direction of social realism has been tentative. In an apparent reflection of the conservative tastes of its loyal viewers, its thematically bolder novelas, such as *La jaula de oro* and *Pueblo chico, infierno grande*, tended not to be hits. By the end of the decade, producers had realized that what was required was just a veneer of social realism, along with a continuation of reliable melodramatic formulas, such as Manichaeian characters and exaggerated acting styles (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 591f). Thus, for example, a ratings-topping 1997-98 remake of *María Isabel*, a 1960s classic in which a provincial Indian maid falls in love with the scion of a wealthy urban family, now included some use of the indigenous Huichol language and specifically Huichol – as opposed to generically Indian – dress styles (Paxman, 1997b). Teen-oriented novela *Soñadoras* (1998-99) dealt with teen drug abuse, but in a superficial and didactic fashion; similarly, *Amigas y rivales* (2001) concerned women with AIDS but evinced neither depth nor much promotion of understanding.[xxxvii] Still, some bounds have been pushed back for good, with a more objective portrayal of homosexuals (e.g., Azteca's *La vida en el espejo*, 1999; Televisa's *Tres mujeres*, 1999-2000) and a continued probing of Mexico's political arena (e.g., Azteca's *El amor de mi vida*, 1998, and *El candidato*, 1999).

The other notable trend has been increased competitiveness in the export arena. Televisa had particular incentive to grow its dollar income after December 1994, when devaluation cut the peso's value in half and dollar costs (equipment, programs, interest payments on debt) became a heavy burden. In addition, the export success of *Café con aroma de mujer* put Colombian novelas on the map. Soon, traditional export powerhouses Televisa, Globo and Venezuela's RCTV and Venevisión were increasingly finding the global market awash with rival product, not only from Colombia but also from Peru, Argentina, Chile and Mexico's Azteca, undercutting established prices (Paxman, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b; Hernández, 2001: 147.)

By the mid-1990s, at least one scholar was contending that novelas were being altered to enhance export success, in the sense that cultural and national characteristics tended to dissolve into a universal export-formula (Mazziotti, 1996: 113). Hernández (2001) examined this issue in detail and found

substantial evidence of the strategic shaping of content with one eye on the export market, chiefly through attention to production values, use of attractive locales for exteriors, and the transnational employment of actors. Interestingly, his findings tended to indicate that this trend did not compromise “authentic” representation of the producing country.

However, content manipulation for export purposes per se seems not to apply very much in the case of Televisa, largely because it has had little need for it. By far Televisa’s most important export market is the United States, where two-thirds of the 35 million-strong Latino population is of Mexican descent, thus apt to share many of the cultural values of Mexicans, and keenly recipient of Mexican novelas (Moore, 1996; Sinclair, 1999: 111f, 116). In 1997, Televisa reaped an estimated \$40 million from its supply deal with Univisión, one-third of its program export revenue (Variety, 1997), a proportion that has likely since grown to a majority, given the rapid expansion of the U.S. Hispanic advertising market and the improved terms that Televisa gained when it restructured its output deal with Univisión in late 2001, whereby it would now be entitled to 12% (up from 9%) of the latter’s advertising revenue (Porter & Luhnnow, 2001).

Similarly, Televisa’s overall export strategy over the last ten years has largely focused on new approaches to sales, not a honing of content. The Univisión “barter” deal – that is, unlimited programming in exchange for a fixed percentage of ad sales – dates from 1992. The following year, the same concept began to be applied to relationships with buyers in Central and South America. By late 1997, Televisa’s Miami office claimed that ten had signed up and that its sales to the region had more than tripled to \$35 million, twice the sum of all other intra-regional exports combined. Sales to the rest of the world, meanwhile, were fostered via a separate office established in New York. Since 1996, Televisa program exports have consistently topped \$100 million and constituted at least half of the global novela export market (Variety, 1997; Sutter & Paxman, 1998; Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 511-15).

Moreover, the size of the Mexican advertising market is large enough to ensure that Televisa recoups its costs at home; in 1995, an investment bank calculated that Televisa made \$2 to \$3 in advertising sales for every \$1 it spent on novela production. The same can be said for Brazil’s Globo. For both, export sales are effectively “gravy,” industry slang for pure profit. But the ad markets in Colombia, Venezuela and elsewhere are frequently too small – above all, in times of recession – to guarantee coverage of such costs, so the incentive to shape novelas for export and to part-finance them through pre-sales is much greater (Paxman, 1996c).

There is in fact some dispute over the extent to which export-oriented modifications are desirable or effective. Higher production values, including greater use of exteriors, may be ill-received by domestic audiences accustomed to “flat” lighting and relatively cheap sets.[xxxviii] Sales executives may hype production values to buyers, but veterans of this business have candidly admitted that a novela’s story is, by far, the key to its ratings success.[xxxix] The one alteration universally held to boost (intra-regional) export without harming domestic ratings is the selective use of foreign stars in leading roles, and Televisa did make something of a return to this practice in the mid-1990s; in such cases, actors tend to “neutralize” their accents so as not to appear overtly foreign to local viewers (Sutter & Paxman, 1998; Hernández, 2001: 148f, 186-88).

Ironically, incorporating greater social realism and universalizing a product for export are in some senses contradictory goals, since social realism would tend to imply a greater specificity of time, place, dialect and language (including slang), each of which may inhibit a novela’s appeal to foreign audiences. Televisa has navigated this contradiction by making small concessions in each direction, while fundamentally continuing to produce its “authenticated” Mexican telenovela.

In sum, Televisa’s adoption of veneer of social realism and renewed embrace of regional actors – all the while retaining its emphasis on the exaggerated, Manichaeian form of melodrama that it has successfully produced and exported for three or four decades – suggests that over the last ten years its telenovela has resisted any radical hybridization or regionalization.[xl] The Azteca/Argos novela, on the other hand, began life in 1996 as a South Americanized hybrid. Yet its very regionalization, though it involved stylistic aspects foreign to Mexican television, ironically contributed to a greater mexicanidad, inasmuch as it introduced a greater realism of language, setting and thematic content. However, while the social

impact of Azteca novelas has been considerable (Hernández & McAnany, 2001), Mexico's novela industry and export profile remains dominated for the time being by the "authenticated" Televisa format.

Conclusion

Historical evidence alone makes clear that the Mexican telenovela, in its origins and early evolution, is a very much a hybrid genre; equally, it is readily apparent that, as the model has gained in popularity and shed many overt signs of foreign influence, the once self-evident nature of its hybridity has diminished over time. However, the theoretical approaches discussed in this paper allow us to unpack the concept of hybridity, discuss its various meanings and permutations, and as a consequence appreciate – more fully than impressionistic evidence or the bare historical facts allow – the term's aptness for explaining the birth and development of the genre in Mexico.

García Canclini's discussion of hybridization and authenticity enables us to view the telenovela as a cultural artifact no less Mexican for having its origins in a multiplicity of transnational sources (after all, the Mexican nation itself is nothing if not racially and culturally hybrid). At the same time, it is no less hybrid in its construction for being commonly perceived as a manifestation of *lo mexicano*. Robertson's conception of glocalization reminds us that the introduction of the foreign or global into a specific arena of cultural production gives rise to an artifact whose local modification is an inevitability. Indeed, this point may serve as a reproach to those politicized critical scholars who have insisted that Mexican television is but a medium for cultural imperialism and the telenovela but a vehicle for capitalistic and consumerist values; the most one can reasonably concede to this argument is that such values, though undoubtedly present to some degree, coexist with other values that are necessarily Mexican.

Giddens' concept of structuration helps us appreciate that the very parameters of commercial and generic structure that U.S. agents delineated when they introduced the telenovela to Mexico established a new, creative space for the flourishing of local agency and creativity. These forces in turn helped to remold those same parameters, eventually producing the genre to a high degree of local, and international, commercial success. The focus of Straubhaar, Hernández and others on regionalization, finally, prompts an awareness that globalizing forces are by no means necessarily U.S. in origin, and that in the context of a linguistically and culturally defined audiovisual market such as Latin America (or, more properly, the Spanish-speaking world), not only program flows but also transnational cultural influences are frequent and pervasive, though not necessarily culturally compromising.

Altogether, these approaches lead us to the general conclusion that a telenovela is, paradoxically, no less Mexican for being hybridized and glocalized at its inception and regionalized at various stages of its development. What makes sense in theory is borne out in perception: the telenovela has evolved distinctly enough in different parts of Latin America for TV industry executives and academics alike to be able to refer to the Mexican variety – predominantly conservative, theatrical, Manichaean, and *rosa* (or *blanda*) – as quite distinct from the Brazilian, Colombian or Venezuelan versions (López, 1995; Martín-Barbero, 1995; Paxman, 1996d; Hernández, 2001). What remains debatable, however, is the utility of the term "hybrid" to describe a cultural artifact that today, despite the continued absorption of global or regional influences, evidences a formal structure, artistic style, commercial basis and popular appeal that have largely gone unchanged, or that have evolved without significant erosion of an authenticated *mexicanidad*, for at least three decades.

Endnotes

[i] Writers in English have often used the transliteration *The Rich Also Cry* [or *Weep*], which suggests that the rich do not only laugh, they also cry (e.g., Allen, 1995 and 1996); I prefer *The Rich Cry Too*, which better conveys the actual implication of the original Spanish: it is not only the poor who cry, but the rich also.

[ii] Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 261-64; Torres, 1994: 79-114. Torres notes that *Los ricos* averaged 45.5 points, which ranks it high but not among the very highest-rated novelas for the years he covers

(1960-87), the top five averaging from 49.2 to 53.6 points. However, *Los ricos*' score was handicapped by an initial 19:00-19:30 schedule; only after 15 weeks was it upped to the prime 21:30-22:00 slot. *Los ricos* was further remarkable for sustaining high ratings over an 11-month period (11 Apr. 79 – 2 Mar. 80), twice the duration of the typical Mexican novela.

[iii] The Russian success of *Los ricos* is the subject of Baldwin (1995), whose endnotes list some of the phenomenon's international press coverage; see also Allen, 1996. Academic discussion of the telenovela's exportability began with a special edition of *Communication Research* (11:2 in 1984) and Everett Rogers & Livia Antola, "Telenovelas: A Latin American Success Story," *Journal of Communication* 35 (1985): 24-35.

[iv] Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 88-95, 261-64.

[v] I refer to the perceptions of viewers and scholars alike. Viewer perceptions of a program's mexicanidad are discussed in the following section. Scholarly descriptions of Mexican soap operas as categorically distinct from U.S. ones are legion, tending to cite basic differences in relative duration, timeslots and local popularity of the stars.

[vi] For discussion of these two approaches to the telenovela, see López (1995: 256-8) and Biltereyst & Meers (2000).

[vii] These slogans were used by Mexico's best-selling brands, José Cuervo and Sauza, in the mid-1990s. Ironically, but tellingly for our purposes, the parent companies of both brands were owned by British multinationals at the time.

[viii] For simplicity's sake, I shall hence refer to the broadcaster as Televisa. The company originated in 1930, when Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta founded XEW-Radio. Azcárraga soon dominated Mexican radio, co-invested in the Churubusco film studio, and in 1951 launched Mexico City's Canal 2. In 1955 he merged Canal 2 with rival Canal 4 (founded in 1950) and Canal 5 to form the monopoly Telesistema Mexicano (TSM). In 1972 his son, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, merged TSM with a rival start-up, Televisión Independiente de México; the new company, with three networks and the makings of a fourth, debuted as Televisa on 8 Jan. 1973 (Fernández & Paxman, 2001).

[ix] I of course allude to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991). The nation-building role of Televisa is discussed in detail in Alex Saragoza's *The State and the Media in Mexico* (forthcoming) and intermittently in Fernández & Paxman (2001): 65f, 95-100, 105-08, 171-76, etc.

[x] Fátima Fernández Christlieb, a leading communication scholar, admitted this tendency in an interview many years later: "[C]ámbios en el facilismo. Perdimos como críticos la posibilidad de hacer un análisis más de fondo. Nos daba flojera el análisis de contenido... pensábamos que el libro *El Capital* de Marx nos daría la capacidad de análisis. ¡Qué era eso! Fueron tiempos del blanco y negro. Entonces Televisa era mala"; *Telemundo*, 1998.

[xi] This is an important caveat. What Straubhaar's research has yet to take into account is an international proliferation of U.S. programming and ready-made channels, since circa 1990, via cable and satellite pay-TV systems. In developing countries such as Mexico, this content is typically viewed in the relatively small proportion of households that constitute the upper-middle and upper classes. In another context, Straubhaar neatly terms such viewers "a small elite with truly globalized cultural capital" (forthcoming: Ch.1, p22).

[xii] That is, as opposed to the British model of publicly-owned commercial-free television, which Mexican officials considered in the late 1940s but rejected; Paxman & Saragoza, 2001: 72; Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 59-62.

[xiii] See footnote 8, above.

[xiv] The discussion of *Senda prohibida* that follows is entirely based on these passages, except where indicated.

[xv] That is, to use Hernández's term; the preferred term in Mexico is *novelas rosas* (rose-tinted novelas).

[xvi] The plot in brief: Nora, a poor young woman from the provinces, arrives in Mexico City with dreams of becoming a performer. To climb the economic and social ladder, she uses her youth and beauty to charm a rich, married lawyer into making her his mistress. But her machinations only take her so far; in the end, the lawyer returns to his wife and Nora returns, defeated, to her village. Meanwhile, Nora's closest friend in the city, who has relied on her education rather than her sexuality to get ahead, ends up marrying a wealthy man.

[xvii] This 1960 law also contained a clause that guaranteed an absence of state censorship, a contradiction that may be taken to imply that Televisa itself was to function as the censor of what advertisers produced or imported. It was thus Azcárraga who became chief custodian of audiovisual "buenas costumbres," although soon he adopted the precautionary practice of allowing the Interior Ministry (Gobernación) to revise novela scripts before shooting.

[xviii] While Venezuelan television adopted the Mexican earpiece, the leading Brazilian network, Globo, never did so (*ibid.*), a differentiating factor which seems significant in light of Brazil's development of the more realistic *telenovela dura* (Hernández, 2001: 86ff). That the earpiece can be considered a distinctively Mexican aspect of production was affirmed in the mid-1990s, when U.S. soap opera actors and directors, under contract with Televisa to make English-language novelas in Mexico City, refused to use it (Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 525f).

[xix] Where the parallel ends, of course, is that Hollywood tended to preach a vision of American social mobility, while Pimstein and Televisa propagated an ideology of social stasis, mobility being limited to pretty women who do not choose their wealthy partners but are chosen. This basic difference may go some way to explaining why Televisa novelas (unlike Hollywood cinema) have had little success in penetrating markets, such as northern Europe and Anglophone North America, that evince relatively high levels of education and social mobility.

[xx] The discussion of Televisa's regional pre-eminence that follows is based on these pages (Chapter 5), except where noted.

[xxi] Statistics compiled by Straubhaar et al. (2001) confirm that little regional programming was broadcast in Mexico at this time, such product making up just 0.1% of airtime in a sample week in 1962 and 1.4% in 1972.

[xxii] Statistics compiled by Straubhaar et al. (2001) show that U.S. programs constituted 37.9% of the total (5,150 minutes of a total of 13,595 minutes) during a sample week in 1962 and only 25.9% (4,350 minutes of a total of 16,775 minutes) in 1972.

[xxiii] The discussion of Televisa between 1973 and 1993 that follows is based, except where noted, on Fernández & Paxman, 2001: Chapters 7-10 and 12.

[xxiv] Televisa traditionally measures primetime as 4pm-11pm. During much of 1979 and early 1980, for example, Televisa aired first-run novelas on Canal 2 from 4:30-8pm and again from 9:30-10pm, *Los ricos también lloran* occupying the coveted late slot; *op. cit.*: 261f; Torres, 1994: 109.

[xxv] Though the custom is now dying out, Mexican white-collar workers often worked until 9pm. The long work day was broken up by an extended lunch break-cum-siesta, typically from 2:30pm until 6pm.

[xxvi] Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 255f; facts and figures obtained from profiles of Televisa in *Variety*, 31 Mar. 1976: 41, 66, and from Grupo Televisa, S.A. de C.V. (IPO prospectus), Goldman Sachs, Dec. 1991.

[xxvii] In contrast to the case of Brazil, Mexican music of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, its place in popular culture, and the role of television in its development (or atrophy), is a vastly under-researched area. For brief sketches see Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 186f, 201, 273, 430, 623 and 632-4, and Zolov, 1999: 249-59. For a study of the Mexican music industry's basic structure, see Riggio, 1986.

[xxviii] A discussion of the subjectivity of authenticity is beyond the scope of this paper, but I use the word "authentic" as an ironic nod towards García Canclini. That is, if we agree with him that cultural authenticity is necessarily elusive (as every cultural artifact is the product of a mix of influences), it follows that any claim that a given pop group is "authentically Mexican" is absurd. At the same time, in a relative sense, such a claim is as tenable as the size and longevity of the fan base that makes it.

[xxix] In fact, racial marginalization in Mexican television has tended to draw most attention from foreign observers. See, for example, Mary Williams Walsh, "Amid Dark-Haired Mexicans, Blonds Really Have More Fun," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Feb. 1987: 30; Tim Padgett, "Is Mexico Blond?," *Newsweek*, 17 Feb. 1992: 27; Michael A. Fletcher, "The Blond, Blue-Eyed Face of Spanish TV," *Washington Post*, 3 Aug. 2000: A1; Dana Clavo, "Charting a Course for TV Fame," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 Aug. 2001: F1.

[xxx] The call for more exterior shoots was also driven by an awareness that Brazil's Globo, one of Televisa's chief competitors in the export market, was already using them. *Los ricos también lloran*, by contrast, featured scenes set in the Amazon that were entirely shot on a sound stage, decorated with a few potted plants.

[xxxi] For press reports, see for example: Marjorie Miller & Juanita Darling, "El Tigre," *L.A. Times Magazine*, 10 Nov. 1991: 24ff; Matt Moffett & Johnnie L. Roberts, "Mexican Media Empire, Grupo Televisa, Casts An Eye on U.S. Market," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 July 1992: A1; Joel Millman, "El Tigre Pounces Again," *Forbes*, 6 Jan. 1992: 44.

[xxxii] Reports on the domestic and foreign success of Televisa novelas in the Mexican press are too numerous and routine to cite. For a remarkably perceptive report on this subject in the U.S. press, see Matt Moffett, "All the World Sobs Over Mexican Soaps, 3-Hankie Exports," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 Jan. 1992: A1.

[xxxiii] There is a good historical case to be made for tracing Mexican consumerism to its eruption in the United States of the 1920s, but as it becomes widespread, with the rapid growth of Mexico's middle class and mass media from the 1940s, it is ever more questionable that it can continue to be held as a U.S. value system; certainly, Mexican consumerism soon took on distinctive attributes, notably the pervasive nationalism described in earlier in this paper. Besides, I would argue that Richard Pells' thesis about the "myth of Americanization" of post-war Europe holds true for Latin America; it is, he writes: "[a] powerful and enduring myth, often cherished by the Europeans themselves because they can use it to explain how their societies have changed in ways they don't like..." (1997: xiv).

[xxxiv] The popularity of such refritos (refries), as they are known, is likely related to the fundamental appeal of the telenovela rosa as a drama that affords viewers a sense of constancy and even predictability; on this and the popularity of refritos, see Fernández & Paxman, 2001: 150-55, 515f, 546; Hernández, 2001: 133f.

[xxxv] For example, *Nada personal* "soared to near the top of the ratings [in 1996]" (Epstein & Padgett, 1997: 36) and "rose to the top of the ratings" (Hernández & McAnany, 2001: 401). Ratings agency Ibope put the average household rating for its 9-month run at 12 points (Paxman, 1997a); mid-season, in August, it sank to 80th place among weekday shows, with an 8.7 rating, against a range of 16.7 to 31.9 for Televisa's novelas. Foreign journalists may have been further predisposed to hype Azteca's products by their lack of cultural affinity with the genre; for those used to U.S. primetime or the BBC, a relatively realistic product like *Nada personal* surely offered welcome relief from what *Time* called the "cultural vacuousness" and "schmaltzy love stories" of standard novelas (37).

[xxxvi] See Wilkinson et al., 2000 and Hernández & McAnany, 2001; both rely on charts published in *Adcebra*, which actually correspond to the capital alone. This confusion of metropolitan with nationwide ratings was often fostered by Azteca itself. Following a story I wrote for *Variety* (13 Oct. 1997) on an unprecedented ratings victory for *Mirada*, complaints by Televisa and consultation with Ibope led to me to realize that the purportedly national ratings chart supplied by eager Azteca personnel in fact pertained only to the capital. *Variety* printed a correction. Still, Azteca corporate press releases that fall continued to claim that *Mirada* was “the most popular program in Mexico.”

[xxxvii] My thanks to TV critic Álvaro Cueva for his observations about *Soñadoras* and *Amigas y rivales*. In a 24 April 2001 personal communication, Cueva added: “Social content has been diminishing. Now it’s just politically correct to include some controversial aspect or health issue, but the treatment is very superficial.”

[xxxviii] *Morir dos veces* (1996), the one recent Televisa novela to employ a textured, filmic look (that of U.S. primetime series, as opposed to the flat, shot-on-video look of U.S. daytime soaps and most novelas) was a ratings failure.

[xxxix] To wit: “The plot is 60% or 70% of the success of a novela,” and “If you lack a good story line, it doesn’t matter how good your production values are. It’s not like a Hollywood film” (Paxman, 1998a).

[xl][xli] The constancy and conservatism of the Mexican novela are further affirmed by the frequency with which hits of previous decades are “refried,” that is, remade with a new cast and sometimes a new title; see footnote 34, above, and Sutter & Paxman, 1998.

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