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# Globalizing Tequila: Mexican Television's Representations of the Neoliberal Reconversion of Land and Labor

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During the twentieth century, Mexican identities were shaped in great part by the ebbs and flows of mass culture. The specificity of gestures, the discourses about masculinity and femininity, the language and ideas proper to social interaction are generally traced back to the films of the Golden Age (1935-1955), the broadcasting of mariachi music, boleros, and other musical productions as well as to televised spectacles (Martín Barbero 166; Monsiváis, *Aires* 58-59 and *Amor perdido* 76-82; Murphy 251; Ramírez Berg 20-28). But the depiction of glamorous faces of film divas like María Félix and Dolores del Río, or the bravado of masculinity derived from the acting of Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete would have been less effective if a consumer culture did not accompany these visual discourses (Joseph 10). Once Mexico entered in the '50s to the category of what Debord calls the societies of spectacle, consuming clothes, soaps, drinks, and food were akin to consume music and images.

One of the most salient products from the time of the construction of this modern national identity is tequila. Even if many of the values and nationalist symbols of Mexico's Golden Age of cinema were abandoned or displaced by others at the end of the century, media portrayal of tequila as the Mexican drink *par excellence* is still a current practice. However, what the stereotypical and modern marketing of tequila as a fashionable drink almost always fails to communicate is that this beverage is the product of a long colonial history. On one hand, tequila emerges from the local knowledge and agricultural practices of pre-Columbian times, directly related to the production of *pulque* "nectar of the gods,"

and with the production of textile fibers widely used in ancient Mexico (Nabhan and Valenzuela 6, 15; Wisniewski 11).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, tequila production was only made possible by the imposition of European distillation technology on indigenous practices (Sánchez and Fentanes 27; Nabhan and Valenzuela 9). In this sense, the hard liquor embodies the “purification” process related to the racial and economic practices of stratification associated with European colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Later on, during postcolonial times, tequila came to symbolize the triumph of *mestizaje* with all the implications for modernization and internal colonialism that this ideological concept brought about in Mexican history (Nabhan and Valenzuela 14). As a result of this long association with Mexican identity, tequila has been hailed as the drink of the nation since the nineteenth century (Muriá 48).

With historical roots emerging from millennia of indigenous history, and then flourishing as a specific practice of colonial production, tequila is now, in this new era of globalization (which began in 1492) becoming one of the most prominent products of Mexican transnational trade.<sup>3</sup> In a way, tequila corporations are leading the process of “globalization from within.” This is to say, a process in which a local industry reaches the “free markets” of the world in similar or better conditions to comparable industries stemming from developed countries.<sup>4</sup> In the following pages I consider the implications of this process of globalization from within, at two different levels. First, I discuss its impact on labor and the cultural practices of the rural population of Southern Jalisco, Mexico. Second, I will analyze the visual culture attached to the mythology of tequila as the “national” drink and its symbolic reconversion by the television industry.<sup>5</sup>

## Agave Cultivation: Salvation or Reproletarization of Mexican campesinos?

The images of fields covered with *agave* plants cannot be more dramatic. A plant with a phylogenetic history of millions of years with some rather harsh and primitive characteristics, the *agave* is identified by its numerous, elongated and thorned leaves (Garrido and Rodríguez 5). The high production of sugars—mostly in the form of fructose—in the core of this porcupine of a plant, is the most important element for the preparation of alcoholic beverages. Its prolonged life cycle, lasting from seven to nine years, is the best indicator of its rugged and strong condition (Sánchez and Fentanes 14). In terms of labor, the most intensive phases of its cultivation are the transplanting of the buds or *hijuelos* and the cutting of its leaves, a process called *jima* that leads to the final crop of the *agave* “heads” (Figs. 1 and 2). In between, there are field chores involved, mostly related to the cleaning of other competing species, which can be done through manual labor or by using chemical herbicides. Another important but optional activity is the annual fertilization (Nabhan and Valenzuela 33–44). Symbolically, in the cultivation of *agave* and in the production of tequila there is a mixture of traditional, non-mechanic labor (cultivation and *jima*); tasks related to the most advanced agro-technology (usage of tractors, fertilizers and GPS mapping), and chemical processing (the production and distillation of alcohols). While many other beverages and food products share some of these characteristics, it is only the marketers of tequila who insist upon displaying this multiple temporality as a way of emphasizing the recently-acquired global status of their product without losing its appeal to tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that *agave* looks like a plant related to cacti, the former is genetically very different from the *sabuaros* of the Sonora desert. Nonetheless, it does share some of the low requirements for annual precipitation of the desert species. This quality makes it suitable for lands without irrigation or for those with low levels of precipitation. The relatively few conditions required for the production of *agave* makes the cultivation of this crop an alternative to the seasonal planting of corn, the most important activity in many rural areas of Southern Jalisco and the rest of Mexico. Of course, where the soil is better and richer, *agaves* thrive.



Fig. 1

More than other species, *agaves* can grow on land with significant inclines; the only limitation is the circulation of the tractors and trucks needed for the mechanized methods of corporate agriculture. However, all these favorable conditions would not be

as important for the rapid multiplication of land devoted to *agaves* if it were not for the dramatic changes the Mexican economy and the tequila industry faced during the late 1980s and early '90s.



Fig. 2

With the Agrarian Law of 1992 the *ejidatarios*—communal land holders—could acquire the property rights to their plots and associate with private capital for the exploitation of land (Kurtz 176-78; Klooster 111-12). This defacto “privatization” of the agricultural system was the last effective political strike against the legacy of the revolutionary era (1910-1940) (Krauze 422; Soederberg 176).<sup>7</sup> The neoliberal policies of the eighties and nineties gave legal expression to the end of the “Mexican dream” of the previous era of modernization: ten acres and a tractor with free education in a welfare state that never had the economic

means to be one. In the late '90s, after the doors opened for privatization, journalists and economists feared the return of *latifundia* with its quasi-monopolistic accumulation of land in the hands of a few and the dispossession of thousands of *campesinos*. These conditions were not unlike those that triggered the uprising of Zapata and Villa in the Mexico of the early twentieth century. But those fears proved to be unfounded. More than ten years after the formal end of *ejido*, things did not turn out that way. The privatization of communal lands have been very slow but the consequences for the peasants were quite the same: rampant poverty (Kurtz 182). Due to the loss of income and lack of employment 400,000 Mexicans migrated each year between 2000 and 2004 (SAGARPA 67). The majority of these migrants came from rural communities.

The long-lasting crisis faced by 25% of the Mexican population who make a living from agricultural activities can be synthesized as follows:

1. In the last twenty years, neoliberal restructuring programs have accelerated the historical transference of capital to the financial institutions and to transnational corporations that control the production of seeds, fertilizers, and chemicals.

2. As a consequence of the 1995 crash of the Mexican economy and of the generalized default on private loans caused by the re-privatization of the banks, financial institutions are deliberately slow—if not outright refusing—to extend credit to small and medium agricultural entrepreneurs.

3. The terms negotiated for the agricultural chapter of NAFTA allowed for extraordinary advantages for powerful corporations like ADM, Cargill, and others. In that, they indirectly receive the benefits of large subsidies given by the U.S. government.

This process allows for American companies to introduce grains and basic foodstuffs at dumping prices without comparable compensations for Mexican producers.

4. Mexican governments, including that of Vicente Fox, failed to promote the appropriate policies for the reconversion of agricultural production and were not able to create new employment opportunities required for the absorption of the surplus in manual labor that resulted from the radical changes introduced by the North American Free Trade Agreement. This situation further fueled the need to emigrate for large sectors of the rural and urban poor.

5. The economies of scale necessary for the survival of the modern agribusiness require cultural and economic conditions inaccessible to the vast majority of peasants and small producers (Chávez 87-92; Kurtz 162-203; Roza 115-24).

Given these conditions, for many *campesinos* with small plots and no chances of obtaining credit from the newly privatized banking system, the option of planting corn while the transnational giants systematically surpassed the market quotas with highly subsidized transgenic grains was a choice between losing money while working for themselves, or leasing their land and selling their labor to others in order to earn a bare subsistence. Faced with this choice, the chance to rent the land to the highest bidder became a matter of survival. Thus, conditions were ripe for the reconversion of peasant land from an agriculture of subsistence to the production of more marketable products.

The Mexican countryside has a complex structure. Along with the *ejidos* most of the agricultural production was traditionally in the hands of small and middle agro-entrepreneurs. The latter groups were the first to invest in the production of agaves in the

early 1980s. Due to the soaring prices of tequila, numerous independent producers jumped at the opportunity to make a “sure” profit on the production of *agave* heads. Unfortunately, by 1995 rising financial costs compounded with falling prices due to overproduction resulted in the bankruptcy of many small and large independent farmers. Open conflict arose between the associations of rural producers and the tequila manufacturers (Rivera; Nabhan and Valenzuela 60). The days for adventurous farmers investing in “green gold” were numbered.

With the structural weaknesses in both the private and communal agricultural sectors setting in by the mid '90s, and as a result of the fluctuations in production and pricing, the big tequila houses started to look seriously at the possibility of taking over the agricultural side of the business, an idea they had thus far avoided. The Sauza, Cuervo and Herradura corporations—major players in the production of tequila—started to offer an annual rent of \$60 US dollars—and in exceptional cases \$120—per acre to *ejidatarios* and small farmers. Aside from this, some *campesinos* qualified for a yearly supplemental government subsidy called “Procampo” of \$32 per acre. Altogether these monies translated into a steady flow of \$92 per acre annually, for a period of seven to eight years, which was the standard for an *agave* production contract. In this way, numerous *campesinos* became renters or even absentee owners of a small plot of land. Meanwhile, they were also free to sell their labor force as seasonal workers for the same tequila corporations, or for the high-tech fruit and vegetable companies, or, as many chose, to emigrate to the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

Since many *ejidatarios* in the region had a plot of ten acres, their annual income reached \$920. In theory, this money

could bring a small family out of extreme poverty without compromising the labor of the *campesino*. At first sight, the rural worker appears to have the opportunity to receive a small amount of rent while working for others, and also the freedom to join the ranks of the under-employed by going into the informal sector in the cities under a system that was liquidating his way of life, and thus barely contributing to his own survival. In contrast, for the big tequila houses, the newly gained hegemony of the cultivation of *agave* translated into an uncontested ability to control prices and levels of production while becoming a steering force in the determination of land renting prices. The globalizing ambitions of the tequila corporations were closer to crystallization than ever. Unfortunately for their poorer counterparts, these measures also resulted in the re-proletarianization of the rural worker.

This volatility in the economy of agave cultivation, however, presented another dramatic turn of events by the mid 1990s. Due to the rising demand for the product and the introduction of international regulatory measures in 1994 which effectively repositioned the Mexican industry as the sole authentic producer of the liquor, the sector was seeing an unusual period of prosperity (Sánchez and Fentanes 24). Levels of tequila production rose rapidly and the need for raw matter to feed the agave furnaces grew faster than anticipated. This time, it was the small tequila producers' turn for trouble. By the end of the millennium a reduction in the supply of raw materials forced the closing of the small tequila factories that were not able to invest in acquiring or renting large tracts of land (Nabhan and Valenzuela 61). This last change further skewed the market in favor of the large players.



Giants of the industry such as Heradura and Cuervo corporations managed individually up to a total of 45,000 acres each in 2002. Some 70% of this land pertained to communal plots. Furthermore, the mechanization process allowed them to cut in half the number of manual laborers between 2001 and 2002.<sup>9</sup>

These developments enabled “Casa Cuervo” to increase its profit margin in terms of both relative and absolute surplus value. In 2002 alone, the annual revenues reached 300 million dollars. This successful reconversion of the business combined with the boom in sales, allowed the owners to buy out their Canadian partner, Seagrams, Ltd. This last move helped Cuervo achieve vertical integration by regaining control of all the aspects of the industry: land rent, raw material production, industrialization, distribution, exports, and financing. In fact, the globalizing ambitions of Cuervo were so favorably impacted that they have symbolically achieved what many critics of globalization have predicted: that the increasing power of international corporations and the porosity of the weakened State institutions would result in the ceding of control from the nations to private interests.

In 1996, Casa Cuervo acquired a small island in the Caribbean and founded the “República de Cuervo,” a state with rights of nationhood that sought representation in the United Nations after declaring its independence. Looking beyond the publicity stunt that the creation of this new “nation” represents, the symbolic implications of the act are striking (Fig 3). Transnational corporations brought about by a process of “globalization from within” of peripheral economies now have the same possibilities for erecting state

powers as the imperial and colonial ventures of the past were able to establish (Sassen 276). It is very telling that after leading an effective process of globalization as a business and after detaching itself from the watchful eye of the State through liberalization, a company with new-found powers readily acts on its desire to carve out a national space of its own. After several changes to their website, the Cuervo corporation now insists on the metaphor of the “business as a nation” by naming “embassies,” identifying a Ministry of Defense (against boredom) and a Museum of Cuervo in an aerial view of the island, and displaying its own “declaration of independence” (see “Welcome to Cuervonation”).

As is frequently the case, to every process of globalization from the top corresponds an effort of globalization from below.<sup>10</sup> For all its negative economic effects in Mexico and in Latin America in general, neoliberalism has mobilized some sectors of the population (Portes and Hoffman 75). On the opposite side of the spectrum from the successful class of agro-exporters, an unexpected effect of the economic disaster of 1995 was the unprecedented independence gained by the associations and NGOs in the agricultural sector. The detachment of these organizations from the corporate politics of the PRI increased their force and enabled them to present a multifaceted challenge to governmental institutions. Organizations like the CAP (Permanent Agrarian Congress), El Barzón, and the movement eloquently called “El campo no aguanta más” (The countryside can’t take it anymore) effectively forced the government to sign into law a rural development plan and has constantly pushed for the re-negotiation of NAFTA’s terms (Bartra).<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 3

The new relationship between the *campesinos* and the local corporations are effectively substituting the symbolic ties that the Mexican state had established with the rural population in the previous round of modernization. Under the developmentalist model fostered from the 1950s to the early 1980s, the *campesino* was to expect the financial and technical backing of the State in addition to basic services (Kurtz 172). However, the intended model of a Welfare State was actually that of a “Remedial State,” which would barely provide health services and elementary education in a selective and limited way. Furthermore, the last two PRI governments’ aggressive pursuit to implement neoliberal policies threatened to dismantle most of the assistance programs.

The reintroduction of land to market circulation and the transference of regulatory measures for the *agave* cultivation to a “non-profit” organism (the Consejo Regulador del Tequila [Council for Tequila Regulation] or CRT), completed the imposition of the neoliberal credo of privatization, deregulation, and globalization to the sector.

The effective economic reconversion of the tequila industry from a small traditional enterprise into a global player in the production and commercialization of alcoholic beverages had striking material effects on all parties involved, but this process also altered the symbolic contract between rural society and the nation state. Certainly, through this process the rural population shed the paternalistic cloak of



the governmental presence but at the same time lost the sheltering space provided by the assistance of the State. Logically, such transformations had the potential to attract conflict and protests, as they did. Clearly the government had to display some economic and political palliatives but more than ever, required a media strategy to symbolically compensate the rural sector and avoid the looming conflicts. For the latter need, the Salinas and Zedillo governments counted with the faithful collaboration of the television industry.

Despite the unconditional support Televisa had shown for the government, the prominence of the protests by some rural producers and other sectors made it necessary for the newscasts and *telenovelas* to approach the evolving changes in Mexican society (Murphy 254; Hughes and Lawson 14). How, and to what effect were societal and economic changes integrated into the discourse of prime time melodramas? In what way could fictional television genres approach and represent the unraveling of the old regime, while still acknowledging the apparent empowerment of civil society? These are the questions guiding the analysis found in the following pages.

### **Tequila, telenovelas, and Neoliberal Nostalgia for Land in the 1990s**

In 1998, Mexican audiences had the choice of watching two different *telenovelas* in which the main characters were involved in the production of tequila: *La mentira* and *Azul tequila*.<sup>12</sup> This sudden “spectacularity” accorded to tequila culture made echo of visual discourses stemming from the Golden Age of Mexican film and the lyric

repertoire of mariachi music. In the new serials, just as it had been in classic movies, tequila was a symbol reinforcing nationalism and masculinity, at least in the folkloric and stereotypical form often exploited by visual melodramas (Sánchez and Fentanes 91; Monsiváis, “Preface” 15; Nabhan and Valenzuela 18).

What seemed unusual in the late nineties was a certain change in the traditional plot and what could also be regarded as a reversal of some elements of the ideological codes accompanying the melodramatic base. In *La mentira*, produced by Televisa, the supremacy of urban culture over rural poverty was problematized or destabilized to a certain degree. From their inception in 1952 *telenovelas* have repeated the same message: social advancement, material progress and “civilization” are always associated with the city. These ideas echoed the developmentalist and highly centralist orientation of Mexican politics under the PRI.

It is important to note here that I am talking about a change and not a revolution in the representation of social conditions in *telenovelas*. *Azul tequila* and *La mentira* were still typical products of the Mexican media. However, as in other *telenovelas* of the last ten years, the traditional three or four degrees of separation between socio-political reality and television narratives seemed to be reduced to one or two.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in contrast to the generalized occupational categories of early *telenovelas*, husbands and fathers tended to now have “concrete” professions. The old industrialists and *licenciados* (lawyers) made rich from “business” in general or by inheritance, became owners of textile emporiums, executives of plastic production firms and fish packing factories or, in this case, *hacendados* cultivating *agave* for tequila distillation. This turn towards the

“real” can be traced back to the 1980s when the filming of provincial and tourist destinations became a staple for the most successful *telenovelas*. The superficial association of official nationalism with landscape was put to work by Televisa, the tourism industry, and the State. Now the rich TV families not only lived in Mexico City but also had connections or lived in Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Acapulco.

Suddenly (but not surprisingly) in the '90s more and more “stellar casts” brought to life narratives based in semi-rural or rural environments. Long sequences in *haciendas*, in small town churches, in *cañaverales*, with women on horses, and with sexual encounters under clear skies in the middle of a corn field were not unheard of in the new stories. Characters had two parallel sides, they were depicted as having rural and urban personas. They had attachments to a provincial city for commercial or financial purposes, but they also had incomes derived from some specific agricultural form of production such as cattle or horse-raising, or as traditional professionals in small provincial towns. The combination of these non-urban subjects and their interconnection with decidedly urban categories makes the analysis of these *telenovelas* more complex than ever. Furthermore, certain technical innovations and a more cinema-like camera usage seemed to reveal the aspiration of producers to transform *telenovelas* into more of a cross-class and transnational spectacle rather than crude cultural products for the “illiterate masses,” as the cultural critics of the past sometimes called them.

Romanticizing tequila production as a narrative construct is one of these complex issues. In *La Mentira* the female protagonist, Verónica (Kate del Castillo), was related to a family of bankers. She fell in love with Demetrio (Guy Eker) the owner of a

small tequila production business. Given the stirring crises in both the tequila and the banking industries which were widely covered by the media during the mid '90s, we must ask: was there ever a more convenient marriage of economic and symbolic capital to portray on television? Supporting a modernized image of women and beyond the convoluted story of desire, deception, and treason there was no marked unbalance between the two characters in terms of economic power or better education. They supposedly met as equals in terms of class and their family relations brought them back and forth from shady hacienda corridors to luxurious Mexico City mansions, and to lavish Guadalajara estates. With this itinerant usage of national space the old tenets of stereotypical representation—backward and sleepy province vs. fast and modern city—were collapsing.

At some point, each family's sources of income were seriously endangered. The crises in the *telenovela* ran parallel to the crises in Mexican society, albeit with three years between them. For Verónica's family, threats came in the form of a national economic disaster and the scheming of some unscrupulous partners at the bank. For Demetrio, the budding tequila baron, the stock of barrels, along with the infrastructure at the *hacienda*, were ravaged by a flash flood. Of course, these dramatic sequences allow the characters to be portrayed as compassionate, stoic, and simply put: magnificent “human beings” who stand up against adversity. In parallel editing, spectators first watched characters fighting the flood appropriately dressed to face nature with boots, jeans, and hats. Then, for the urban financial crisis, the honorable bankers suited up for the killer press conference to announce that the bank would back up their clients down to the last cent.

Back in the streets, in the nontelevisual Mexico, the middle class, the *campesinos*, and the independent *agave* producers were not that fortunate. Yes, both bankers and ranchers suffered the consequences of the "Tequila effect" as the financial crash in Mexico, and its rippling effect in Latin America was known in 1995 (Notimex "Efecto"; Rozo 118). However, while banks received the benefits of a rescue program (*fobaproa*), ranchers and small investors were left to weather the storm on their own (López Obrador 52). Ultimately, *La mentira* functioned as a narrative of containment, as an instrument to level the emotional playing field and show the suffering of all parties involved as being equal. Quite fitting to the emotional teleology of melodramas, the crises depicted in the *telenovelas* derived from human nature and from the unfathomable effects of natural forces.<sup>14</sup> What seems unbalanced is that while human vices like greed, lust, and revenge were suitable for representation, governmental irresponsibility and corruption, or the dishonesty of many of the banking firms, were not.

In *Azul tequila*, the family saga takes an historical approach to the romanticizing of tequila as a multisemic symbol. The story revolves around the patriarch of a well established house of tequila production. The scenarios are dated as taking place just before the Revolution of 1910. The stakes in the struggle between brothers Arcadio and Santiago include the affection of their father, the ownership of the hacienda, and the love of a woman symbolically named "Azul." The color blue plays an important role since the main characteristic of the tequila plant is also inscribed in its scientific name "Azul Tequilana." Thus "azul" means woman, and it means *agave*, and at the same time, it brings us back to the idea of territorial property.

Therefore, desire is directed towards land and woman as the most important of male possessions. Here, psychoanalytic reasoning would lead us to think that infatuation with tequila and the revival of *haciendas* is merely a reference to phallic power. But this line of thinking is just too simplistic; the socio-economic and cultural implications are far more complex.

The representation of struggles for power and authority ran deep in this revamped foundational fiction (Estill 171-72).<sup>15</sup> In the nineties, the organic crisis in Mexican politics unsettled the foundations of society and ultimately stirred the instruments of domination. Even the bourgeoisie and the hegemonic classes had to endure a certain degree of anxiety and incertitude when speculation and the banking crisis exploded in 1995. Indeed, the social movements like Zapatismo and Barzonismo, together with the independence of large sectors of the labor movement, caused increased tension in the relations of the industrial and financial classes with the government (Chávez 87; Soederberg 177). The signing of NAFTA, the restrictions imposed by the IMF, and the presence of the opposition in the Congress contributed to the reduction in the discretion with which governments could manipulate the budget as leverage to deal with workers and *campesinos* (Kurtz 181). Under these circumstances, the mobilization of symbols for national unity and for political legitimacy could not come from the familiar image of the suit-wearing talking heads from newscasts, nor could it come from the sunglass-wearing figurehead associated with the traditional politician. It was only in the residual images of the *campesino* culture, in the *hacienda*-style houses, in the "banda" music, in the boots, and in the brass buckles where any positive reaffirmation of

nationalism could be placed.<sup>16</sup> Tequila, of course, was an essential element in this list of legitimating artifacts.

In terms of the circulation of symbolic power it is also relevant to mention the sudden craze for the restoration of old *hacienda* buildings among the local bourgeoisie in Jalisco, Querétaro, Guanajuato, Puebla, Yucatán and other states. Catering to the taste of its wealthy clients and adducing a desire to “rescue” the Mexican cultural patrimony, Banamex, one of the most important banking institutions (later acquired by Citicorp) released in 1996-97 a set of two coffee table books with 400 or more pages, each lavishly illustrated with epic and nostalgic portrayals of the architecture of the old estate houses of the “patrones” (Fernández de Calderón and Sarmiento 13). Apparently, by 1997 banks were ready to celebrate *haciendas* as a past to resurrect, notwithstanding their continued reluctance to extend credit to anyone but the wealthiest of their patrons, those who seized the opportunities of NAFTA or who were rescued from the financial turmoil by the neoliberal government of Zedillo (1994-2000). This nostalgia for land in a society that was less and less attached to its rural sector seemed to be a symbolic contradiction. However, it was precisely in this contradiction that the pleasure derived from the televisual spectacle resided. In an era where the old stability promised by the PRI was rapidly eroding, the economic capital around the hacienda could be translated into a symbolic investment certain to appear as an immediate trait of distinction.

In its aim to support or substitute the state as an ideological machine for the reproduction of nationalist symbols, televised spectacles promised and delivered something for everyone (Murphy 251, 254). For the lower classes, the apparent *indigenista* and *paisajista* sequences exalted

and romanticized physical labor appealing to a pictorialism that echoed revolutionary muralism, the Golden Age of film, and exploited visual discourses that went as far back as the portraits of Saturnino Herrán and José María Velasco in the nineteenth century (Lucie-Smith 24-26). These elements displayed by *Azul tequila* provided a source of identification with the practices and tasks of the agricultural worker.<sup>17</sup> The itinerant and dual persona of Demetrio and Verónica in *La mentira* reflected more of the mobility and the media awareness present in the middle and lower classes in the central and western states of Mexico. These are the states that provide the majority of migrant labor to the United States. Very often, Mexicans from these areas share the experience of working the fields in Guanajuato or the fields of the San Fernando Valley in California, while taking some time to visit or live in Guadalajara, Tijuana, Los Angeles or Chicago. They have been in the cosmopolitan city and they know how to move around in the crop field. They probably drank tequila in Mexico and drank tequila in the U.S.

For the middle and high classes *Azul tequila*, *La mentira* and the Banamex books on *haciendas* brought about reminiscences of a world where the land-owner, or the capitalist had a say not only in the sphere of production but also in the social, religious, and family affairs of the workers. The pans of long corridors and arches together with the colonial decorations and furniture, gave a historical patina to the tearful and passionate narratives. *Haciendas* as architectural and economic spaces were self-sufficient and were sites for primary accumulation before and after the independence. As such, they evoke times of stability and patriarchal domination that by 1998 seemed long gone and unattainable.

In an age termed by García Canclini as one of postnational and fragmented identities, the tequila industry inexplicably preserves an aura suffused with traditional symbols (cf. García Canclini, *Consumers* 91). Based on the cultivation of a harsh and biologically primitive plant, most tequila brands carry family names and pretend to be family-owned businesses with origins in a legendary and still-standing *hacienda* carefully (and sometimes very recently) restored. This “locus of tradition” and the new practices of commercialization became an investment in symbolic capital and functioned as a tool for legitimacy in the marketplace.

The ideas and symbols presented in *telenovelas* appeal to conservative and nostalgic minds in all classes even though most of their images corresponded to an idealistic conception of the rural economy that was far from reality. However, in the national market, tequila advertising functioned as a source of identification among the entrepreneurial and technocratic minds of neoliberal times. Tequila companies were by then admired as high-tech corporations with local and global capital controlling all aspects of production and commercialization. Since 1974, tequila is a registered mark and has strictly defined areas of production and industrial specifications (Sánchez and Fentanes 31, 34; Wisniewski 30).<sup>18</sup> In 1997 the Regulatory Council of Tequila won several international law suits against European and South African producers who allegedly sold bootlegged “tequila” (Wisniewski 33). These small victories were read as reaffirming stories demonstrating the possibility of successful competition of Mexican entrepreneurs in the global market against commercial giants. Nowadays, in the most exclusive wine boutiques, a good bottle of tequila has reached the prices of the best whiskeys and

cognacs in the world (Notimex, “El tequila compite”).<sup>19</sup> This is an inspiration for investors, and is certainly setting a precedent for other family businesses dreaming of globalizing their operations.<sup>20</sup>

From a media perspective, the tequila melodramas could be viewed as self-promoting narratives pointing back to the television companies as the bearers and champions of the values and symbols they honed in their own programs. Spectacles marrying the rural and urban worlds re-confirmed the self-promoting claim that they served the “large Mexican family” without distinctions of class. By romanticizing globalized family businesses, Televisa was also advertising its own history as a company formed and managed by two powerful clans.

Moreover, it is important to remember that the television wars of 1993 took away some of the prestige of both companies. For Televisa, who had faced the prospect of real competition for the first time and who had lost some rating points for a couple of months to the prime time programs of TV Azteca, launching a trendy “realistic” melodrama that purportedly followed political life, was clearly an effort to recapture their glory as specialists in tying high emotional content to nationalistic images, the proven formula of their success. This was no friendly sparring; after all, the main revenue of most Latin American television companies depends on the high prices of the advertising slots of prime time *telenovelas* (Mato 238). For TV Azteca, who was emerging from a suspect process of privatization, the promotion of a history-based melodrama such as *Azul* with high production values was a way to show and confirm its ability to compete against the other half of the duopoly, while cajoling the governmental elite and the public with the most traditional traits of Mexican nationalism.



Finally, from the perspective of the standard practice of cultural and media criticism, it is important to note that *telenovelas* as cross-class spectacles have become more complex objects of analysis. They are clearly commercially standardized products, but their reception by dynamic and often fragmented audiences resists theorization. To the dismay of some traditional intellectuals, they are real sources for the construction of contemporary structures of feelings, as literature and film were before. As such, they can no longer be dismissed as flat and inconsequential; they can no longer be accused of being only and foremost demoralizing and de-nationalizing products. It is ironic, but in many cases they are perhaps the only source of historically contextualized narratives that could preserve some sense of belonging to a history or to a nation in which extreme poverty has made a luxury out of books and formal education a fantasy of electoral rhetoric.

If the visual discourse of *telenovelas* saddles the commercial with the national imaginary, tequila production embodies the contradictions of a process of globalization from within. On the surface, the successful projection of a national product into the global market is perceived as a paradigmatic narrative of success, and indirectly serves as a confirmation of the relevance of nationalism in the postmodern social imaginary. However, the flipside of the coin is much less idyllic. The process by which globalization is achieved bares the disquieting signs of the decomposition of the social compact of a State that was already dysfunctional. Under this confusing circumstances, the nostalgia for the national is much less a problem of symbolic viability but rather a set of problems demanding a material solution for thousands of *campesinos* who have not yet found the way out of the labyrinth

of neoliberal economic policies and are anxiously searching for answers in the cities or beyond the national borders.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Pulque* is one of the many indigenous drinks derived from the more than one hundred varieties of agave plants native to Mexico (cf. Garrido and Rodríguez 7). *Pulque* is referred in Aztec mythology as a gift from Mayahuel, the goddess at the center of legends related to abundance, inebriation, and male and female sexual potency (Clendinen 245).

<sup>2</sup> The production of the “vino mezcal de Tequila” was banned during early colonial times because the product represented a direct competition against peninsular alcoholic beverages. However, given the extreme popularity of the spirit among the mestizo population, the vice-regal authorities had no other choice but allow and then tax its consumption (Sánchez and Fentanes 27).

<sup>3</sup> Literature on globalization differs as to what constitutes the first era of globalization. World Systems historicism and especially Latin American cultural and historical criticism considers the Encounter of Europe and the Americas as the founding moment of modernity and globalization (Dussel 9,13; Mignolo 21).

<sup>4</sup> I use the term “globalization from within” to describe the process by which a traditional product and its associated practices or industrial know-how become the subject of global marketing, using the financial, and cultural resources from its country or region of origin. This process is different to the standard form of globalization usually generated by the forces and with resources stemming from the metropolis.

<sup>5</sup> Reconversion is the term applied to the economic and cultural transformation of traditional activities that are rearticulated into modern processes (García Canclini, “Cultural Reconversion” 31).

<sup>6</sup> The ability to inhabit multiple spaces while acting according to multiple temporalities is recognized as one of the most important characteristics

of global actors and global forces. Obviously, a product embodying these qualities can be viewed as the quintessential global commodity. In many ways tequila has these qualities.

<sup>7</sup> The Salinas office (1988-1994) was characterized by the obsessive display of “modernizing gestures.” The privatization and de facto cancellation of the agrarian system was accompanied by the expedient and poorly debated adhesion to NAFTA, the resumption of direct diplomatic relations with the Vatican, the re-privatization of the banking system under poor regulatory conditions, the wholesale transference of the official television system IMEVISION in a dubious deal to TV Azteca, the sale of Telmex (the national telephone company) to one group that immediately acquired the benefits of a monopoly, and other “grand” designs inspired by the Neoliberal credo strictly, albeit corruptly followed by the penultimate authoritarian PRI government.

<sup>8</sup> The combined effects of privatization of land, the banking crisis, and the empowering of the tequila corporations by the disturbances in the economic cycle amounted to what David Harvey has termed as “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 98). Thus, many *campesinos* and rural producers have lost their ability to participate in the agricultural sector. The effects of this phase of global capitalism have pushed ever larger sectors of the Mexican population to contemplate migration to the U.S. as their sole alternative.

<sup>9</sup> Data compiled during successive visits to Southern Jalisco from 2000 to 2003. The prices, rents and amounts of governmental incentives were current in the municipalities of Sayula, Venustiano Carranza, Tonaya, and El Limón among others.

<sup>10</sup> Arjun Appadurai recognizes the complex action of emerging NGO’s as a form of grassroots globalization that may or may not support the policies of the nation state but in any case represent a resistant force against the averse effects of globalization (Appadurai 16-17).

<sup>11</sup> At the behest of the official and independent rural organizations the lower chamber of

Congress approved and signed a new “Ley de desarrollo rural” (Rural Development Law) but Fox’s government dragged its feet and it was only partially implemented. It is interesting to consider that this course of action was taken by a president whose family business in his native state of Guanajuato remains the production of fruits and vegetables for export. For the successful and politically influential agro-exporter the laws protecting the production of corn and beans are clearly not urgent or necessary.

<sup>12</sup> There is nothing coincidental about this thematic concurrence. Since the inception of TV Azteca in 1993, the two main television companies embarked on what is now known as the “television wars.” Initially the new company captured only 10% of the audience and 10% from the total advertising revenue (Fox 49; Hernández and McAnany 393). This was not enough for the emerging group and so the directives launched an aggressive campaign to attract stars, programs, and public. In the end, the war amounted only to a dispute for ratings without offering better options to Mexican audiences (Orozco 231).

<sup>13</sup> This turn towards a closer representation of reality in *telenovelas* was in fact a continental phenomenon in the late eighties and nineties. Brazilian as well as Venezuelan serials started to follow, mimic, and even mock the political and economic events of their societies introducing a critical voice against the corrupt politicians of the time (Valenti). Televisa’s programs, although immersed in this new mode of representation, were more conventional. While they did make direct references to current events they carefully avoided any direct association with political personalities. This is not surprising for a monopolistic company that has always cultivated its close ties to political power (Murphy 256).

<sup>14</sup> The Russian Formalist Balukhaty described melodrama as having an “emotional teleology” whose main purpose was to provoke the greatest possible intensity of feeling in the spectators by relating all narrative and dramatic elements to the expression, reference or cultivation of emotions (Gerould 121).

<sup>15</sup> Adriana Estill highlights the close ties of the imagined community in Mexico and telenovelas in general by appropriating Doris Sommers's term of foundational fictions. The concept is even more appropriate when used to understand the symbolic functions of historical telenovelas like *Azul tequila* or for narratives of heightened realism as *La mentira*.

<sup>16</sup> The aura of "authenticity" and "honesty" accorded by the public to this attire was perhaps one of the best electoral tools displayed by Vicente Fox as a candidate in the 2000 election. His speech marked with rural registers and folkloric gyrations—and his image carefully crafted as a "ranchero" from central Mexico—gave him not only a distinctive audiovisual presence but also helped to contrast his messages against those of a traditional politician like Francisco Labastida, the PRI candidate.

<sup>17</sup> During the broadcasting of *Azul tequila* when the transmission cut to or resumed from commercial break brief shots of some of the characters were used as a way to aestheticize the serial. One of the most frequent images was one of a secondary character reclined against a tree. The man, with visibly indigenous physical traits and dressed as a *campesino* evoked Saturnino Herrán's portraits of the turn of the century and Diego Rivera's murals. The low angle shot and the framing of the scene were clearly a sentimental refashioning of *indigenista* images.

<sup>18</sup> 1974 is the official year for the recognition of "denominación de origen" (trade mark) for tequila in Mexican territory. The recognition by Canada, the USA and the European Union were obtained by the Consejo Regulador del Tequila (CRT) in subsequent years.

<sup>19</sup> In 2005 the total revenue from tequila exports reached 500 million U.S dollars. In the primary sector (agriculture) tequila ranked only third after beer and tomato (SAGARPA 73)

<sup>20</sup> In fact, many other guilds and associations producing art crafts and beverages are following the path set by the CRT to obtain a form of certification in order to protect their products against piracy (Sánchez and Fentanes 32).

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