

Mexican Historical Telenovela: A Memory Mode, Two Narrative Models

*La telenovela histórica mexicana: un modo
de memoria, dos modelos narrativos*

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This article proposes the revision of the evolution of the Mexican historical telenovela, thought as a mode of cultural memory, through the description of the melodramatic genre as a narrative matrix. This description leads us to think about the constitution of a mode of remembrance that has been articulated in two basic models and that remediates facts and characters of nationalist historiography, which made it a cultural support to the official discourse on the national past.

KEYWORDS: Historical telenovela, melodrama, cultural memory, television, Mexico.

Este artículo propone la revisión de la evolución de la telenovela histórica mexicana, pensada como un modo de memoria cultural, a través de la descripción del género melodramático como matriz narrativa. Esta descripción lleva a pensar en la constitución de un modo de recuerdo que se ha articulado en dos modelos básicos y que remedia hechos y personajes de la historiografía nacionalista, lo que lo convirtió en un apoyo cultural al discurso oficial sobre el pasado nacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Telenovela histórica, melodrama, memoria cultural, televisión, México.

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The debates around the concept of cultural memory that have taken place in several publications during the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st have been fruitful in expanding the possibility of observing discourses about the past in different parts of the world. The corresponding literature, often overly focused in certain geographical spaces, has gradually increased its scope to somewhat marginalized academic regions –like it is the case in Latin America–.

This situation becomes reflected in the reading and discussion in the German tradition of cultural memory studies, reconceptualized in the work of Erll (2011). Its influence has been gradually felt –in the present case, in Mexico– due to discussion and debate in specialized seminars of the most important universities in the country. Thus, new approaches to study national cases, especially in cinema, literature, or television, have emerged in works such as the one coordinated by Borsó and Seydel (2014), or the works of Amaya (2016).

In this context, I have found suggesting exploring historical telenovelas –one of the most important fictional products of Mexican television– from the concept of cultural memory. This format may be thought of as a variation of traditional telenovela, since it shares certain core narrative axes, anchored in the classic melodramatic genre. It also shares strategies of production and broadcasting that have been developed during more than 60 years of Mexican television. Along with its traditional matrix, the historical telenovela is one of the noticeable forms in which the Mexican viewer has read its own past.

Although partly neglected until recently by academia, the historical telenovela has always been under suspicion for being a way to retell the past filtered by the establishment, due to conspicuous links between the main broadcaster (Televisa) and the Mexican government. Nevertheless, for Reyes de la Maza (1999), the interest in doing this kind of telenovelas did not come from a dubious relation with the government. It came from the concern of some of the people involved in the nascent telenovela production of the 1950's, worried with the shallowness of the narratives and the interest in inserting them in a culturally sanctioned discourse (1999). It seems that the first attempts to make a serious fictional product would entail dealing with important matters, such as national history (Dorcé Ramos, 2005).

Hence, it is a fact that historical fiction televised in Mexico has a basic format and genre. Because of that, it is relatively easy to trace its history. Nevertheless, the main concern for the objective of this text is to return and re-think it from a central conceptual axis: one that understands this type of products as media of memory, specific ways to retell the past that involve modes of remembrance specially tailored to massive audiences in Mexico. In this sense, this text comes from a reflection about the mediality of memory –chiefly put forward by Erll (2011)– in order to trace the relation between the ways of remembrance in national television and both the melodramatic genre and the constitution of telenovela format inside the Mexican television industry.

To address the issue, we basically worked on three aspects. First, it was sought to demonstrate in Erll's theory (2011) the importance of the phenomena and products that constructs memory from their mediated condition. These, according to the theory are constituted in memory modes, specific ways of articulating remembrance based on three different structural dimensions (materiality, institutionality and schemata) and operations, such as premediation and remediation, which show how these remembrances are plotted.

The proposal in this text is that televised melodrama itself is a narrative scheme in which the construction of memories on Mexican television has operated. Therefore, a section is dedicated to theorizing the basic structures of melodrama and their functions within Mexican television products, specifically the telenovela. Based on these two frameworks, the history of the national historical telenovela is recounted, in order to demonstrate the structuring of two narrative models that were kept alive throughout the history of these types of products, based on experimentation, within the limits of the format, regarding ways of plotting the national past.

The central hypothesis is that, on the one hand, melodrama operates as a basic schemata in historical telenovelas, not only as a form of basic narrative structure, but as a way of dialogue with Mexican nationalist historiography. Related to this, a second aspect of importance is that in that dialogue, the historical telenovela constantly remediates characters, historical processes and forms of representation that pre-exist. It is

recognized that a historiographic study that evidences these previous remediations would be important for this. However, the text proposes a framework that serves for subsequent analyzes where the historical telenovela is a central case.

CULTURAL MEMORY AND ITS MEDIALITIES

It would be pointless to re-trace all the discussions around memory (collective, social, cultural, communicative) that have taken place through at least a century of reflection around the concept. In this sense, it becomes more pressing for a concrete analysis the need to outline the specific relations from which the case at point is observed. As I stated before, the concept of cultural memory is relatively recent, notwithstanding the discussions on social and collective memory, that already have a certain tradition in Latin America, specifically around matters of oral history, recent history, dictatorships and repression. In the case at hand, it seems especially fruitful to reflect around the television formats that consciously and explicitly narrate specific national pasts, such as the Mexican historical telenovela.

In this case, it has seemed especially appropriate the definition of cultural memory by Erll (2008a), thought as the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts. This conception leaves open the possibility to think in diverse materialities as evidences of remembrance process, if those cases are inserted in a specific historical horizon and as long as they happen through an evident mediality. This cuts through the old debate dividing history of memory, taking the former as one of several means to fulfill the interaction among times and structures of remembrance, that the author reveals as central in her definition. Thus, she acknowledges the contribution of a tradition going from Halbwachs to Warburg, and from Nora to the Assmanns; but she treats this contribution through an essential element: the clear mediated character of memory.

Assuming the cultural character of memory, Erll (2011) acknowledges the use of a metaphor, an umbrella concept, which helps to see the relationships between different phenomena and establish connections between “tradition and canon, monuments and historical

consciousness, family communication and neuronal circuits” (p. 99). The proposition intends to point out the interdisciplinary nature of its conceptualization, recognizing the mediated condition that these remembrance phenomena (both individually and collectively) have. Erll seeks to correct the existing distances, between the different conceptualizations of the term memory, by establishing connections between possible levels of analysis that constitute the mediality inherent in the memory process.

Zierold (2008) recognizes in the proposal of Erll the advantage of including the integrative concept of “media” as one of the foundations to increase the power of analysis of the present day phenomena related to memory, going above the isolated studies of the phenomena of remembrance anchored in an exclusively social conception of these processes. Thus, the false distinction between different types of memory –communicative memory and cultural memory– offered by Assmann is overcome; as well as the seemingly false distinctions between ways of seeing the past in which previous discussions centered.

By making evident the mediated character of cultural memory, it becomes necessary to give an account of how it is constituted. Erll (2011) proposed three dimensions of memory that should be taken into account: material, social and mental. The first two display the technological and institutional structures in which the remembrance is articulated. They make allusion of the artifacts and their bearers that make possible to access a specific form of remembrance. But the third appeals to concepts, codes and shared schemata that make possible for a society to have sense of the narrated past. This tripartite logic, very well established in media studies gives great potential to Erll’s proposal to analyze present day forms of memory that are evident in today’s mass media. Hence, its importance to return to the telenovela as a specific mode of remembrance in Mexico because it makes palpable “the quality and meaning the past assumes” (Erll, 2011, p. 104).

To recognize the power of certain mediations on memory, Erll (2008b) proposes three levels in which memory media operates: intramedial, intermedial and plurimediated contexts. The first refers to the rhetoric of remembrance and the form they assume in relation to the medium chosen to narrate the past. In that sense, the media determines

the way of remembering. This level has a close relationship with the plurimedial networks of senses about the past which materialize in the act of reception. This refers to reception contexts where there is a network of other media representations that prepare the ground to provide the environment with some power to shape memories.

It is on the second level, the intermedial, where that relationship between rhetoric and context is established, through two key concepts: remediation and premediation (2008b). With the first, already more important in this work, she refers to the repetition of moments, characters and memorable processes, through time and through different media, that generate a canon of constructions about the past that allow the story to be recognized as part of a continuum of specific representations. On the other hand, premediation is the way in which existing media provide schemes for future experiences and representations of the past. The double movement between both elements makes the past intelligible and stabilizes memories of particular events, turning them into specific modes of memory.

It is possible then to think the Mexican historical telenovela as a specific mode of national remembrance. To that end, I will appeal to the description of one element and a story. I will attempt to link it to the narrative genre (melodrama) in which it is inserted, thought as a prevalent schema in television, with its materialization as a format in the Mexican model of telenovela. From that, I will give an account of the evolution of Mexican historical television through its most relevant examples and its characteristic forms of narrating the past.

Evidently, telenovelas are not neutral when it comes to remembering the national past: they do it through a selection of facts and characters that Mexican nationalistic history has represented from the beginning of the 19th century. Because of that, they are important in the act of remediation and premediation of national memory. Like films, historical telenovelas have been a key cultural element in Mexico in the process of the symbolic consolidation of the State after the Mexican Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century; hence the political dimension of memories in television.

It seems thus necessary to describe the three levels of the text, in order to conclude with a reflection around the potential of the telenovela as a specific mode of remembrance in Mexico.

THE MELODRAMA

The melodrama as a subject of discussion has been well treated from the second half of the 20th century, in a debate taking place across disciplinary borders, which is materialized in key readings, as well as case studies. The interest in the genre comes from thinking about melodrama in its respective relation with its contexts of evolution, with its amplified use in several social, political, and cultural spheres and with the matrixes of sense with whom it has been matched. The genre has been considered as a way of imagining (Brooks, 1991), as a series of subgenera (Singer, 2001), a cultural matrix (Martín-Barbero & Muñoz, 1992), and –in a provocative posture assuming part of the fore mentioned conceptions– an epistemology (Dorcé Ramos, 2014). This shows the difficulty of classifying melodrama.

If we consider the existence of reality as a narrative articulation, it is easy to think melodrama to give an account of the space/time that constitute us as individuals and collectivities, that provides a limit of sense with whom we situate ourselves in reality. In this context, it operates as schemata, which let audiences make sense and provide a background for the understanding of the narrated, to fill in the absences of information with its particular logic. Thus, it is of crucial importance when thinking about the telenovela, since it places its center of analysis in the frontiers in which the narrative operates.

Melodrama is a form of generating identity that keeps itself near emotion that underlines the sentimental through an extreme Manichean polarization that is articulated from the individualization of the narrated processes. Thus, it becomes the obvious representation of moral absolutes materialized in individuals, institutions and situations, narrated through archetypes. It is used to enact extreme moral injustices, whose reactions come from equally visceral and irrevocable responses. The strategy works to force audiences to take positions on dilemmas with solutions structured in a binary logic (among good and evil), which allows taking a moral stance in constant suspension. Thus, its commercial success is linked to its allegiance to the viewership.

Singer (2001) poses five basic characteristics of melodrama: 1.- A strong pathos that triggers sensations through the representation of a

moral injustice; 2.- The constant presence of overexcited emotions, linked to amplified feelings; 3.- The constant polarization through evident and easily readable representations; 4.- The existence of resolutions that escape individual action which allude to the work of superior forces to break with the obstacles of the moral dichotomy; and 5.- A sensationalist character that emphasizes violence, action, emotion and that is evident in the extravagance. In that sense, the melodrama experience is that of constant crises (Landy, 1991) that are made evident in death, family mutilation, separation, loss and the arbitrary abuse of purity and virtue values on behalf of the villains.

The individual action provokes these characteristics by using hyperbolic figures, which exaggerate everything, making evident the hidden morality, which is “the repository of fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth” (Brooks, 1991, p. 53). With this, social complexity is assumed in a limited number of simple options and allows the audience to take a stand against the narrated reality (Lopez, 1991), based on moral absolutes.

The current melodrama is born with modernity at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century. The ideological context of the European moment, and the slow processes of urbanization and industrialization evidenced the fall of the spiritual and institutional traditions, with the consequent fracture of the ethical and moral principles anchored in the myths of Christianity. Amid this symbolic crisis, melodrama evolved as a powerful way to make sense of basic ethical principles. For Singer (2001) melodrama is articulated in different cultural products as a need to express those continuities in the face of the personal and cultural discontinuity experienced in the rise of modernity; hence, it is a genre of transmedia nature.

In Latin America, the melodrama gave a “distinctive emotional coherence to the complex emerging cultural configurations in the second half of the 20th century” (Dorcé Ramos, 2014, pp. 287-288). Different products of popular culture, some anchored in the mass media, took advantage of the strength of melodrama to match the preponderant oral culture. With this, they linked their own stories with those of the heroes and legends of the traditional culture that was moving to the city, a century after what happened in Europe. In

this context, Martín-Barbero proposes that different aspects of music, literature or visuality of the region assumed the narrative structures of melodrama. This hybridization between the traditional and the modern allowed articulating the drama of the recognition of identity in popular cultures, which immediately acted on the imaginary and collective memory (Martín-Barbero, 2002; Martín-Barbero & Muñoz, 1992).

In that sense, as Lull (1998) points out, the success of melodrama in Latin America has to do with the permanence of matrices of meaning that appeal to nostalgia for an imagined past. Thus, the genre has been a constant of meaning that in specific political contexts has served to generate consensus. Each stage has printed particular characteristics to the melodrama of the region. An example of this has been the Mexican audiovisual industry, which through film and television democratized melodrama, linking it to a nationalist project that called for basic feelings around a political option that emerged from the Mexican Revolution (Oroz, 1995).

In the 20th century, the formula resulted in an effective canon to raise national allegories that would help consolidate the nation's project and the past with which it intended to be linked. Herlinghaus called it "imaginary nationalization processes" (2002, p. 32), which leads to think of historical telenovelas as a key product, a mode of cultural memory for the representation of that imagined past.

MEXICAN HISTORICAL TELENОВОLA: A MEMORY MODE, TWO MODELS TO TELL THE NATIONAL PAST

Undoubtedly, the telenovela is the most successful television fiction format in Mexico, 62 years of presence confirm its prevalence in the taste of local audiences. It is not strange then that it is there where it has been decided to narrate the national past on television. Educated in the melodramatic way that the telenovela materializes, audiences always preferred to see the community origins reflected in the sentimental format. For this reason, the telenovela was the propitious place to remediate certain important issues in the political project of the post revolutionary State. Although cinema and literature already narrated the same past since before the existence of television, the popularity of

this medium made historical telenovela much more relevant, in terms of potential audience.

However, in the history of the development of the historical telenovela, it is possible to see two evident canons of representation: the melodramatization of key characters in history and the generation of fictional stories parallel to historical processes, both driven by one of the television producers of oldest tradition in Mexico, Ernesto Alonso. The first model operated through a basic feature of the melodramatic scheme: the use of hyperbolic figures. With this, the historical telenovela was able to establish the sentimental status with respect to figures that were remediated in the liberal nationalist history, in school, art, literature or historiography, as essentially bad or good. By exaggerating the positive or negative characteristics of certain historical figures, the telenovela was mounted on a pre-existing narrative that allowed to connect with the way the audience already understood their past, their origin as a community. This operation was replicated in the model of parallel stories. However, the incorporation of fictional characters allowed to complexify the past through the representation of diverse positions (indigenous, women, unions, intellectual communities, religious, etc.) that, although they never allowed themselves to argue about the essential statutes of goodness and evil in history, established the existence of more than two positions. In this second model, melodrama also operated in fiction narratives to make clear the positions through diverse moral absolutes.

The historical telenovela allowed to anchor the past to emotion, as a resource to generate loyalty to a way of explaining the national past, already linked to Manichaeic oppositions and remediated in different cultural products. In the early days of national television, the educational potential of the format was still being considered. It seems that the educational preoccupation was the main argument to remove the telenovela from its traditional narratives, constantly accused of being banal, to feed it with a culturally endorsed historical discourse. It was a first attempt to make a “serious” fiction that dealt with important issues, such as national history (Dorcé Ramos, 2005) or, at least, a political vision of it.

It was until 1962-1963 that the first attempt to plot the life of a historical character in the narrative of a telenovela was born. Ernesto Alonso produced *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, with the Spanish Amparo Rivelles as the protagonist. With this first historical telenovela, which was responsible for portraying the life of one of the most appreciated personalities of the national cult, Televisa inaugurated a first model of historical telenovela, whose basis is to melodramatize the life of some historical figure, taking advantage of the contradictory visions that it provokes. The difficulties of the essay soon became evident. Censorship made it impossible to deal with complex issues that revolve around the personality of the poet, which were left aside in order not to question the existing official versions. Conflicts and personality edges that would have enriched the character in search of melodramatic success were left out. This demonstrated the unwillingness to adapt unofficial positions in order to build more complex stories and characters. With this first attempt, the possible limits in the exercise of plotting the past in melodrama began to be evident. The extreme polarization of the characters not only blurred the complexities of their personalities, but forced producers to frame the representations within the boundaries imposed by official historiography.

In a second attempt in 1965, two characters, still more controversial in Mexican national historiography, had their place on the screen: Maximilian and Carlota of Habsburg. The exercise proved to be interesting, making a telenovela of the lives of a couple of romantics who saw the possibility of starting their own empire had all the elements to produce a television hit. However, much of its audience levels were due to the controversies surrounding its production. The first of them had to do with the fact that Ernesto Alonso had given the leading role to an Argentine (Guillermo Murray) and a Spanish (María Rivas). With it, the verisimilitude of the narrated past in relation to the linguistic peculiarities of the characters began to be questioned. The model failed then if it did not adapt to the verisimilitude schemes, in relation to the past, imposed by a revolutionary nationalism that saw a transgression to the national order.

The producer had decided to continue with the idea of characterizing historical characters based on schematic polarizations. Given that

Maximiliano and Carlota were the good guys in history, the role of villain inevitably fell on Benito Juárez.² That unleashed a political problem for the television. Historians, political parties, government officials and unions took their complaints for the mistreatment of the national hero to the Ministry of the Interior,³ which imposed on Ernesto Alonso changes in the original script. Because the producer refused, he found himself in need of cutting the number of planned chapters. Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz himself summoned the producer and senior officials of the television station to make them aware of the dangers involved in interpreting national history and then invited them to consult with historians on the construction of scripts (Reyes de la Maza, 1999; Terán, 2000).

The production of *Maximiliano y Carlota* revealed that the telenovela model which privileged the melodramatization of specific characters could be dangerous before a government that privileged the almost religious cult to certain figures of the national past. While the idea of using public figures' lives was provocative in aesthetic and narrative terms, the needs of a commercial television station to make compelling stories for its audience led to sterile struggles with political power for memory and even direct acts of censorship. The end of this first model of historical telenovela was announced. The idea of a monolithic history, especially in the post-revolution governments, was based on the absence of opposite positions in the development of the nation. Telenovela challenged this story by using as “good” two characters

² Benito Juárez was a Mexican indigenous president between the years of 1858 and 1872. During this period France invaded Mexico to impose an empire favorable to their interests led by Maximilian of Habsburg. The figure of Juárez is of special importance in national politics given that he was the creator of the liberal Constitution of 1857, and the head of the fight against the European invaders, for which he is recognized as a special place in the liberal genealogy of the country, especially in the governments after the Mexican Revolution.

³ In Mexico, the *Secretaría de Gobernación*, or Ministry of the Interior, oversees the television content. It is the main instrument of censorship that exists in media narratives.

considered as foreign invaders, opposed to the development of national liberalism. While it could function as a classic telenovela story, in terms of representation of the past it did not seem justifiable to get out of the remediation scheme in which official history had constantly plotted the emperors.

The problems derived from the stories presented by Alonso led him to look for less controversial past issues and schemes to narrate them. At the same time, the producer took advantage of a generation of scholars from the *Centro Mexicano de Escritores*,⁴ students who ran out of a scholarship and were looking for jobs in television (Castro, 1997). This is how he met young writers like Guadalupe Dueñas, Inés Arredondo, Vicente Leñero, Gabriel Parra, Jaime Augusto Shelley and especially, Miguel Sabido,⁵ to which he added people from cinema and were consolidated in literature, such as Raúl Araiza and Eduardo Lizalde, to experiment with new themes and treatments that allowed him to affirm the sub-format of the historical telenovela.

To transform the historical telenovela they made a basic change. Instead of making a melodrama of the life of a character from the past, they created fictional stories that ran parallel to a historiographic plot that was attached to the official nationalist discourse (Charlois, 2010; Rodríguez Cadena, 2004). This allowed to give a greater depth to the characterization of the time, allow the representation of different social groups and, in a way, counteract the official discourse with historiographical reviews that emerged from the academic historiography and were transferred to the format by means of historical advisers. This second model was paired with a more careful production, with technical experimentations unrelated to the traditional telenovela and with the possibility of exploring the tastes of the audience (Reyes de la Maza, 1999).

⁴ Mexican Writers Center, institution for the promotion of writing, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, through whose workshops many of the established writers of Mexican literature passed.

⁵ Mexican playwright and poet, consolidated as the theorist of the most successful telenovela formulas. Sabido made the first telenovelas of social content that would be a model of edutainment at an international level.

The model privileged the classic melodrama of telenovela in fictional stories. The love and heartbreak stories, the basic schemes of goodness and evil in certain characters, Christian moral absolutes, providential conflict resolution, and so on, played a central role in the assembly of stories set in the past. On the other hand, the official history maintained the symbolic absolutes created by the official historiography, through a political story that evidenced the remediated historical processes and that only established contacts with the fictional narrative through key characters acting within of national history.

In 1967 Miguel Sabido and Eduardo Lizalde wrote for Ernesto Alonso *La Tormenta*. This was considered the first blockbuster of the national telenovela that would allow Benito Juárez to claim his figure after the disaster of *Maximiliano y Carlota*. The direction of Raúl Araiza, with a strong cinematographic influence, made it possible to film in exteriors, reconstruct complex scenes of battle and deepen into different facets of historical figures. For Dorcé Ramos (2005), it was the first telenovela co-produced between the television station and the Mexican government, which allowed a significant increase of economic resources for its realization. At the same time, the collaboration was thought in order to not contradict the official versions of the narrated story, to count on the endorsement of officials of the Ministry of the Interior, and to contract, as the president himself had suggested, historical advisors who sought more stringent truth criteria.

Probably, the major impulse of screenwriter Miguel Sabido was in the resource of telling the past through the interplay between history and fictional family stories. Thus, fictional characters worked to establish the general lines of a melodramatic story. These lines were so successful among the audience, linking historical processes in parallel stories in permanent contact. The political and military processes lost their aridity with social contexts in which fiction plots took place. In *La Tormenta*, sensitive topics such as indigenism, miscegenation and class distances through fictional characters were introduced (Dorcé Ramos, 2005). Example of the success of the formula is that Gabriel Paredes, fictional character played by Ignacio López Tarso, acquired so much fame that the television station received thousands of letters demanding its inscription in names of streets and monuments (Reyes de la Maza,

1999). This revealed the enunciative power that allowed to easily meshing characters foreign to the historical processes in the memory of the audiences themselves. Through the mixture of remediation of specific topics with parallel stories, the Mexican audience felt identified with the moments of national history narrated on the screen, the melodrama worked in that sense to engage the recognition of the past with the dramatic avidity of the audience.

Five years later, in 1972, Miguel Alemán Valdés, a politician and shareholder of the television station, produced *El Carruaje*, with a script by Miguel Sabido. Again, the image of Benito Juárez was at the center of a historical telenovela that used the original model to melodramatize the character's life. Unlike the previous one, whose diegetic time was from the mid-nineteenth century until 1921, in this one, the period of activity of the characters are concentrated in the life of the national hero. By returning to the model proven to be dangerous, care was taken that the plots and forms of representation would adhere to the way in which the official Mexican historiography represented facts and characters. The melodramatic logic characteristic of the genre acquired epic genre dyes, the characters became more complex and their actions contextualized, subverting the unwritten code of the national telenovela of not representing time and space. The life of the hero was shown as a path destined for the sacrifice for the nation, with which the original model of historical telenovela was changed in favor of an official memory, but that allowed non-traditional themes in the format.

The second half of the 70's and the first of the 80's was an extremely difficult moment for the Latin American economies. The television station, with heavy debt abroad had to limit production expenses. Because the production of historical telenovelas was extremely expensive, the audience had to wait fifteen years, until 1987, to see the past narrated on screen. Once again Ernesto Alonso produced *Senda de Gloria*, but he integrated Fausto Zerón Medina, a renowned historian to maintain constant advice during production. The parallel story model came back to narrate the Mexican Revolution (from 1916 to 1940) through the fictional life of the Álvarez family. The number of fictional characters involved allowed audiences to approach different levels of the sociohistorical context, as well as the multiple social movements

that composed what has been normally framed as a linear narrative of the armed movement.

The telenovela appeared in a complex political moment for Mexico. In 1987 the country had gone through one of the worst economic crises of the 20th century. Society was tired of a one-party political regime that, throughout the century had constructed under the myth of the Mexican Revolution, a historiographical justification that allowed understanding the political hegemony of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). After the successive crises that had become common from the late 60's to the 80's, crowned by the inefficiency of government action during the terrible earthquake of 1985 that shook the capital of the country, society was tired of the excesses of presidents, on which almost every political decision depended. A political fracture within the ruling party had separated two currents that sought to face the future of the country in different ways. On the one hand there was a group that was trying to achieve power by democratizing the elections of the PRI candidate. This National Democratic Front identified with leftist ideas was commanded by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (son of the first socialist president emerged from the Revolution and one of the founders of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional itself (previously known as *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* or *Partido Revolucionario Mexicano*). On the other hand, there was a new breed of politicians, trained in North American universities that identified with the new neoliberal model of administration of the national economy. For them, the historiographical discourse under which the party was based had lost its meaning. The social policies that emerged from the Revolution hindered the plans to establish in Mexico the principles derived from the Washington Consensus. In 1988 the election was won by the new neoliberal generation through evident traps that deepened social discontent with its rulers.

In this context, *Senda de Gloria* was raised as a story about the Mexican Revolution that erased the first struggles (1910-1917) in which the motto that guided the revolt evoked, precisely, the return to transparent democracy. However, the telenovela again managed to tell a more complex master narrative, built by the political regime (and the television itself since the 50's), through the incorporation of fictional

stories that made participate to those who without having a famous name took part of the historical process (Castro, 1997). Apparently, *Senda de Gloria* was the maximum achievement, in terms of success above all, of the model of parallel stories in the historical Mexican telenovela. The television station received government support that allowed it to use high-level technical resources under the pretext of maintaining the educational objective of the sub-format.

The fictional history of the Álvarez family, made up of soldiers, priests, trade unionists, arms dealers, pious women and indigenous servants, brought all these issues to the fore. While national history was still present as a history of political events during the Revolution, parallel stories introduced, in a schematic way, elements that for sixty years had been neglected, such as religious unrest in the face of the new liberal regime, workers' struggles, the muralist movement, etc. In that sense, melodrama was maintained as a way of complexing. In this case, another element highlighted: the incorporation of the patriarch (General Álvarez), a clean and "impartial" military, as the omniscient voice of official history. In a sense, General Álvarez, through an extremely "good" personality, judged the facts (through voiceover) to explain to the audience the reason why a diverse armed movement materialized in a single political option, which at the time of production continued to maintain power. The melodramatic resource worked this time, as a way to justify a political option over others, through the remediation of a form of official memory.

In 1994, *El Vuelo del Águila* was produced, which kept the production team. However, historians' known to be related to the neoliberal regime wrote the script, particularly Enrique Krauze and Fausto Zerón-Medina himself. Televisa returned to the model of melodramatization of the characters with the pretext of narrating the life of one of the most controversial dictators of national history, Porfirio Díaz Mori. Precisely his period of domination of national politics had the mark of having provoked the revolutionary revolt that had led to the regime of the PRI in power. As mentioned above, the new neoliberal governments cared little about the symbolic implications of the Mexican Revolution, beyond certain political discourses. This made it possible for Díaz's life to be narrated in an epic manner without further political censorship. Palatial

intrigues, the loves of the dictator, the multiple crimes committed during his regime were good reasons to give impetus to the melodramatic narrative. However, the representation of the historical period, without further criticism of the character, raised suspicion both in the academic community and in politics (especially in the left that still recognized the social contribution of the Revolution) on the reevaluation of a dictator at a time when the hegemonic party saw its total power crumble over national politics.

In this case, the remediation of nationalist interpretations regarding the event was left out of representation. The political model had changed and it was the political left that now maintained the representation, while on the television they struggled, through the academic discourse of historical objectivity, constantly repeated by the advisors, to rescue the figure of a regularly detested character. The melodrama no longer materialized in the opposition between a “bad” dictator against “good” social groups, but rather the contradictions of the character’s life reflected the melodramatic ethical extremes, in order to complexify the remediated representation.

In 1996, the production cycle of great historical telenovelas closed in Mexico.⁶ The Mexican Independence of the early 19th century, a less thorny historiographical theme, served to develop the latest telenovela attached to the model of parallel stories, *La Antorcha Encendida*. The life of three families related by love and hate, was the way to bring the audience to a time of war that led to the independence of the Spanish colony. However, the story begins 25 years before, in the last stage of the colonial period, which allows the audiences to recreate the context in which the three families take opposing positions around the Spanish domain on what would be Mexico. The telenovela came out just at

⁶ In 2010 and 2011, on the occasion of the Mexican Independence and Revolution Bicentennial, Televisa returned to produce historical television fiction with *Gritos de Muerte y Libertad* (2010) and *El Encanto del Águila* (2011). It was preferred to leave these out of the count because both are considered miniseries and not historical telenovelas. They were produced outside the fiction area of the television station and were in charge of the news area, so their characteristics as memory modes vary.

the moment when the patriarch of the television consortium, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, died. Added to this was the fact that neoliberal policies had led to the emergence of a new television network that broke with Televisa's long monopoly, which provoked a war for ratings that together with the economic crisis of 1994, led to the cancelation of all productions that exceed the normal costs of a successful telenovela. With *La Antorcha Encendida*, the historical Mexican telenovela died. In 2007 Ernesto Alonso passed away, leaving the television station without its star producer and the historical telenovela without a production takeover.

The Mexican telenovela has always been a model in development on solid bases on a melodramatic tradition quite attached to the canon. Within it, subformats such as that of the historical telenovela had their own history, in which technical and narrative experimentation allowed to get out of the simplicity and banality of the original model to appeal to audiences thought of as citizens and not only as consumers (Dorcé Ramos, 2014), that came from a minimum knowledge of the national past and that should be instructed by an entertaining narrative. This became an impulse that led us to think about the educational potential of the format in a developing country in which a large part of the population remained illiterate or functionally illiterate. With this, the televised melodrama codes were transposed to represent more complex spaces, moments and characters, giving the plot a time and a space that was denied in the rest of the telenovelas. With this, they formed a mode of cultural memory that was built in the public space of the national, of the patriotic, of the official.

A WAY OF REMEMBERING, TWO INDUSTRIALIZED MODELS

The evolution of the Mexican historical telenovela throughout the years of existence of the sub-format accounts for two elements to be taken into consideration. In the first place, the fact that it was born and developed only within a private television company, monopolistic in many ways and with strong ties to the governments of the post-Mexican Revolution period. This is important insofar as it makes clear the fact that the nationalist history as essential narrative of the

sub-format was of such importance as a television fiction project, that the Mexican government itself was involved in the type of desirable content for the national audience. With this, a series of interpretations of the past that supported a political project were transferred to the telenovela. Historical telenovela served to reiterate certain narratives already established around the past. National historiography guided in many ways the selection of themes, characters, processes and narrative canons that the telenovela told Mexicans.

That is why we see in different cases the constant remediation of certain issues: the Independence War of the early 19th century, the period of liberal reforms commanded by President Benito Juárez in the middle of the same century, its interruption by means of the French invasion and the later conformation of the Empire commanded by the Austrian Maximilian of Habsburg, the dictatorial period of Porfirio Díaz (predecessor and trigger of the Mexican Revolution) and the Revolution War itself. This sequence of historical processes is the one that every Mexican has studied in the elementary levels of their academic formation. However, the telenovela managed to link the narrative nationalist canon with the sentimental and Manichean logic that predominates in Mexican television. The melodrama served as a basic schema to show “the good guys” and “the bad guys” in the political perspective about the past of the ruling party. So evident is that when Ernesto Alonso wanted to take advantage of the melodramatic logic to narrate the life of Emperor Maximilian and his wife Carlota (circumstantial villains of nationalist history), the government was forced to intervene, censure and provoke a change in its narration.

The other element to take into consideration is the fact that the historical telenovela, as a memory mode, was built on two basic models. The first thought from the premise of establishing in the personality of a certain character, the limits of good and bad in relation to the past. However, the model proved dangerous because in the process of narrating the lives of the characters, they always had to look for schematically evil counterparts and, at least in the case of Maximiliano and Porfirio Díaz, that role would fall on the inhabitants of the nationalist pantheon, colliding irremediably with the official historiography.

The second model, more successful, was nourished not only by the melodrama but also by the narrative forms studied by a series of professional writers. With this model built around parallel narratives (national history and fictional story), the depth of historical figures, treated from the logic of political history was lost. But the model gained amplitude around the social processes that occurred at the time, using melodrama to show found positions. With this, the audiences could appreciate the diverse positions that existed in a certain process, materialized in the intimacy of the fictitious families that populated it in the historical telenovela. This also led to productions becoming even more expensive (in relation to the standard cost of a normal telenovela), so they were subject to the vagaries of the national economy.

These two models derive in a memory mode that remediates around processes and characters that are constantly linked to nationalist historiography, known in Mexico as *Historia de Bronce* (Bronce History). Historical telenovelas deepened in a type of historiographical interpretation that was already present in official basic education (not always available to all social strata, as television is). In this sense, commercial television paid to consolidate the post-revolutionary liberal political project, closing the doors to the interpretations of the past that arose from academic disciplinary history and conservative historiography widely marginalized by triumphant liberalism. In this sense, the historical telenovela served as a mode of cultural memory built from a commercial television monopoly and at the service of the Mexican political power.

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