Mexican Melodrama in the Age of Netflix: Algorithms for Cultural Proximity

Melodrama mexicano en la era de Netflix: algoritmos para la proximidad cultural

ELIA MARGARITA CORNELIO-MARÍ[1]

http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5495-1870

By using algorithms to track the data of their users in Mexico, Netflix has managed to solve the equation of *cultural proximity*. Since 2015 it has produced original series that include melodramatic traits, even if they align with genres like comedy, biopic and political thriller. Applying industrial and textual analysis, this article argues that Netflix has established a love-hate relationship with Mexican melodrama, making fun of its conventions but using them nevertheless. It concludes that algorithms have the potential to transform Internet TV providers into competitors for local producers.
KEYWORDS: Netflix, Internet TV, algorithms, melodrama, cultural proximity, telenovela.

Netflix ha resuelto la ecuación de la proximidad cultural en México utilizando algoritmos para monitorear los datos de sus usuarios. Desde 2015 ha producido series originales que muestran rasgos melodramáticos a pesar de pertenecer a géneros como la comedia, la biografía o la acción de trasfondo político. Con base en un análisis textual y de la industria, este artículo sostiene que Netflix ha establecido una relación de amor-odio con el melodrama mexicano, burlándose de sus convenciones pero usándolas al mismo tiempo. Se concluye que el uso de algoritmos tiene el potencial de transformar a los proveedores de televisión por Internet en competidores de los productores locales.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Netflix, televisión por Internet, algoritmos, melodrama, proximidad cultural, telenovela.

INTRODUCTION

Sophisticated algorithms are at the core of the personalized recommendations that many Internet services apply to promote their contents to consumers. These programs analyze huge amounts of data to find patterns that help them predict what users prefer listening, reading, watching, and buying.

Algorithms for the recommendation of music, books, films and television programming have proven to be a competitive advantage for companies like Spotify, Amazon Prime, YouTube and Netflix (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016). These services bid for the attention of users, trying at all costs to gain new subscribers and to keep the existing ones by offering them perceived value.

For those services dealing with media content (i.e. music, television shows, videogames and films), algorithms are useful not only for recommending existing products, the patterns of preference they identify in the *big data* coming from their subscribers can also be used to guide the production of new content (Gillespie, 2014). Therefore, it comes as a logical conclusion that the analysis of data acquired from particular cultural settings could be used to target consumers with products that have a higher level of *cultural proximity*, understood as the affinity that local consumers feel for content that is more closely related to their own way of life.

> [Cultural proximity] is a seemingly common attraction audiences feel for cultural products, such as television or music, that are close in cultural content and style to the audience's own culture(s). Most audiences seem to prefer television programs that are as close to them as possible in language, ethnic appearance, dress, style, humor, historical reference, and shared topical knowledge (Straubhaar, 2007, p. 26).[2]

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[2] Straubhaar (2007) has asserted that, while most viewers favor local content, those with a high level of *cultural capital* show preference for US and international television. This observation has been recently confirmed for cable and satellite audiences in Latin America, noting nevertheless that a majority of viewers in the region "still prefer their national programming…

This paper focuses on the case of the Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) system Netflix in Mexico, paying particular attention to the distribution and production of scripted series that the company has undertaken in the country. The main argument is that, by using algorithms to track data coming from its sizable Mexican subscriber base, Netflix has gained in less than a decade a privileged position for the production of melodrama.

METHODS

The findings presented here come from an industrial analysis of the trajectory of Netflix in Mexico, based on both trade press information and the company's quarterly reports to investors. Data from these documentary sources was coded by using the software NVivo to locate categories such as: use of algorithms, business model, original programming for Latin America, obstacles for entry, among others. This analysis is complemented by an examination of four of Netflix's original scripted series that have a clear melodramatic component: *Club de Cuervos* (2015), *Ingobernable* (2017), *Luis Miguel: La Serie* (2018), and *La Casa de las Flores* (2018). In order to provide some necessary context, the following section presents an overview of the Internet television market in the country.

INTERNET TV IN MEXICO

Netflix calls itself a company of Internet TV which, loosely defined, consists on the streaming of films and television content on-demand via the Internet over multiple devices (e.g. smartphones, tablets, laptop computers, video game consoles, and smart television sets).
    Internet TV, also known broadly as Digital Delivery, broadband-delivered, or Over-the-Top (OTT) television, is changing dramatically the landscape of film and television distribution around the world, offering viewers an unprecedented wealth of content they can access

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Therefore, Netflix's initiative to produce nationally and regionally should be appealing" (Straubhaar, Castro, Duarte & Spence, 2019, p. 250).

virtually everywhere and consume at their own pace (Barker & Wiatrowski, 2017; Lotz, 2014; Tryon, 2013).

There are different business models for Internet TV. The most common ones are:

a) *Subscription Video on Demand*, also known as SVOD, in which subscribers pay a monthly fee to gain access to unlimited streaming (e. g. Netflix).
b) *Transactional Video on Demand* (TVOD), in which users purchase titles individually (e. g. Apple iTunes).
c) *TV Everywhere*, in which the offer of content over the Internet is linked to an Open-to-Air or Pay-TV channel (e. g. FOX Premium).
d) *Advertising based Video on Demand*, in which the streaming content is preceded or interrupted by advertising (e. g. Crackle).
e) A combination of SVOD with some TVOD contents that need to be purchased individually (e. g. Claro Video).

SVOD arrived in Mexico on September 12th, 2011 when Netflix launched as part of its rollover into 43 countries in the region ("Netflix Arrives in Mexico", 2011). At the time in Mexico there was already Internet TV, if we consider that iTunes had been offering video over the Internet since 2009. However, Netflix started a trend in the country, proposing a business model that was totally novel and which was swiftly copied by local competitors (Cornelio-Marí, 2017).

During the following months many other Internet TV services began operation in Mexico. Just a few days after Netflix's launch, in October 2011, the telecommunications company Maxcom announced Yuzu (Reuters, 2014). In November 2011 debuted Totalmovie, backed by Grupo Salinas (Mejía Guerrero, 2011). The following year, in November 2012, the telecommunications giant América Móvil launched Claro-Video (Martínez, 2012), trailed by Televisa's VEO TV, which began operation in early 2013 (Sigler, 2013). The movie theater chain Cinépolis started its own TVOD service Klic in May 2013 (González, 2013). By early 2014 the offer of Internet TV in Mexico included seven main competitors according to *El Universal*: Claro-Video, Sony's Crackle, Netflix, VEO TV, Walmart's Vudu, TotalMovie and Cinépolis Klic (Monroy, 2014).

Not all of those services survived for long: the first one to leave the market was Totalmovie, which closed in 2014 (Alonso, 2014); both Yuzu and Vudu went out of business in 2015 (Rodríguez, 2015; Sánchez Onofre, 2015).

In spite of the early departures, the Internet TV market in Mexico was thriving. New powerful competitors arrived in the next years including HBO Go and Televisa's Blim in 2016, as well as Amazon Prime in 2017 (Hecht, 2016; Navarrete, 2016; Perez, 2017).

Since the beginning Netflix has been the dominant player in the Mexican SVOD market. In 2018 it had 80.8% percent of the 8.3 million total subscribers, well above Claro-Video with 14.6%, Blim with 1.5%, and HBO Go with 1.2% (Cahun, 2018).

Netflix's strong position owes to the fact that it has bet on original local content.[3] The following section presents an account of the steps that Netflix took in order to become a distributor and creator of television content that appeals to Mexican audiences.

NETFLIX'S LOCALIZATION FOR THE MEXICAN MARKET

Behind the current leadership of Netflix in Mexico, there is the fascinating story of how this American service adapted to prosper in Latin American territory, thanks in part to the understanding that melodrama is the king genre and the *cultural matrix* that pervades in the region (Martín-Barbero, 1993).

Latin America and the Caribbean was the second foreign territory where Netflix ventured. As declared in the letter to investors from the third quarter of 2011, Netflix's top executives wanted to have the first mover advantage in a regional market that was going to be many times the size of the Canadian one: "given that Latin America has about 4x more broadband households than Canada, there is lots of room for growth", they claimed (Netflix, Inc., 2011b, p. 6).

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[3]   In fact, *Variety* has noted that SVOD companies in Mexico are focusing on localization by commissioning several original series for this market (Hopewell, 2017).

Besides the rapidly growing Internet market, Netflix's executives considered that the region had two other attractive characteristics: "consumers there enjoy Hollywood content, and we are able to take advantage of economies of scale by licensing content regionally" (Netflix, Inc., 2011a, p. 7).

The opportunity seemed huge for the future but, in fact, Netflix faced several obstacles in its first months in Latin America, such as the low penetration rates of broadband Internet, the scarce use of credit cards, the widespread presence of piracy and the generalized unawareness of what Internet TV was and how it worked (Brooks, 2011).

After the initial enthusiasm, the letter to investors from the first quarter of 2012 contains a sobering appraisal of the region:

Latin America differs significantly from our other markets. While there is limited current OTT streaming competition in the region…, this lack of OTT competition means that the concept of on-demand streaming video (outside of piracy and YouTube) is nascent, requiring us to do more work in driving consumer understanding and acceptance of our streaming service. In addition, Latin America presents unique infrastructure challenges relative to our other markets; namely, low device penetration, under-developed Internet infrastructure and relatively low credit card usage as well as general consumer payment challenges for e-commerce. For example, many banks turn down all e-commerce debit card transactions due to fraud risk, making it a more challenging environment than our other markets (Netflix, Inc., 2012b, p. 6).

Besides such structural challenges, the company realized quite early that one of the most pressing obstacles to account for was cultural difference. For instance, unforeseen preferences in language versions became a costly surprise. The letter for investors for the fourth quarter of 2011 mentions that in Latin America there is "varying preferences for subtitles" (Netflix, Inc., 2012a, p. 5), in what seems a realization of the fact that not all Latin Americans accept dubbing willingly.[4] Since

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4   The preference of audiences for dubbing or subtitling is connected to age, program genre and to the general tradition that prevails in the country (Chaume, 2012).

the company was offering only dubbed and original versions, it had to invest five million dollars that quarter to add subtitles in Spanish and Portuguese, learning a valuable lesson in the process. As their top executives declared: "We expect subtitling costs to continue to be meaningful as we launch additional non-English markets in the future" (Netflix, Inc., 2012b, p. 7). If Netflix was using Latin America as an experimentation ground for international ventures, the region provided it with the confirmation that it was mandatory to adapt its existing content to create loyalty among its new subscribers.

Netflix's efforts to adapt its service for Latin America follow a pattern that loosely matches Chalaby's model (2002). This author's observations on the localization strategies of pan-European channels in the 2000s still ring true to explain the adaptation of other media content distributors. In simple terms, foreign channels –or SVOD services in this case– should begin by creating specific national or regional satellite feeds (or sites) where they can display local advertising windows. Next, they have to translate their foreign content by dubbing or subtitling. The third step is to offer local content. Finally, the last step of localization is what Chalaby calls the local opt-out:

> The local opt-out represents the ultimate level of localization. It does not merely entail local programming within an international feed but the launch of a separate local channel with fully regionalized operations and production facilities. Local staff are hired to adapt international content and produce programmes exclusively for the local market (Chalaby, 2002, p. 194).

In general terms, Netflix's adaptation path for Mexico has followed the model explained above, first creating a specific version of the site for the market; then, dubbing and subtitling its Hollywood and European content into Latin Spanish; next, licensing local content and; lastly, going into original production in the genres that Mexican audiences prefer, such as comedy and melodrama.

The four phases of Chalaby's model imply a growing level of commitment by media companies. It could be argued that Netflix's efforts of localization for Mexico do not arrive to the level of the local

opt-out, but the recent announcement that the company will establish headquarters in the country and work on 50 projects between 2019 and 2020 confirms that its commitment to the Mexican market reaches a similar level ("Netflix to open new headquarters in Mexico", 2019).

This article proposes that the use of algorithms helped Netflix deploy these steps of localization faster and more accurately that a regular linear television outlet would have, giving it an advantage in the distribution and creation of culturally proximate programming for Mexican audiences.

ALGORITHMS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL CONTENT

In Netflix's quarterly reports to investors from the years 2011 to 2019, there are at least ten passages where the main executives imply that the company runs tests to decide many technical and business aspects, from feedback models to payment methods, from personalization profiles to the production of original titles.

Such passages confirm that Netflix has been using all along a *scientific approach* to know its audiences and markets, based on sophisticated recommendation algorithms that analyze the big data coming from its users:

> A key thing that sets Netflix apart is our algorithms for personalization, which help members find content they will enjoy, and lead to increased viewing for any given set of content… We continue to A/B test new algorithms, and our rate of learning is faster than any competitor because we have a larger membership from which to learn (Netflix, Inc., 2012c, p. 8).

Recommendation systems depend on three basic factors: users, items and preferences (Ramírez Morales, 2018). What the algorithm does, basically, is to connect these three factors showing the relationships that exist between them. They aim to identify the preferences that particular users show for particular items, so they can make targeted recommendations. In the world of Internet TV, recommendations that

hit the target translate into more streaming time and thus, into loyal paying customers that will continue its membership indefinitely.

In an often-quoted phrase, Gillespie summarizes the model of services such a Netflix, stating that "digital providers are not just providing information to users, they are also providing users to their algorithms" (2014, p. 173). It is, then, in the best interest of Netflix to earn as many users as possible when it arrives to a new territory.

In other words, when Netflix deploys its service into a new local market with very defined cultural traits –such as Mexico–, it needs to crack the formula of taste, so that it can license, commission or produce appealing content and keep those new subscriptions active for the longest time possible. Not surprisingly, when it arrived to Latin America Netflix stated that it was its priority to learn from its new subscribers: "Now that we are serving hundreds of thousands of Latin American, we can measure what is getting enjoyed a lot, and what isn't, and adjust our mix accordingly" (Netflix, Inc., 2011b, p. 6).

Therefore, the company had to feed its algorithms as soon as possible with data coming from as many local users as it could gather. It was necessary, then, to have the items that Latin American users would prefer, in order to attract them into the system and get to know them in detail. And, which better way to lure local users to Netflix than by offering them what they have "enjoyed a lot" in the past? Old telenovelas by Televisa and other regional producers came very handy for that purpose.

FEEDING THE ALGORITHMS
WITH LOCAL AND REGIONAL CONTENT

There were two complementary ways Netflix became a caterer of culturally proximate content for Mexican audiences: a) by licensing existing local content that has proven to be successful in the past; and b) by commissioning original local content.

Regarding the first strategy, during 2011 the trade press published several reports informing that Netflix had signed deals with leading television companies in Latin America that would provide it with

thousands of hours of local programming, including dozens of telenovelas.

For the Latin American region as a whole, Netflix licensed content from Telemundo (Hecht, 2011), Telefé and Caracol (Marie, 2011). It also signed deals with Mexican producers Televisa (Comlay & Sarmiento, 2011), TV Azteca (Young, 2011) and Canana Studios (Ponce, 2011). These agreements provided Netflix with the items it needed to feed its algorithms and be able to measure the preferences of its ever-increasing subscriber base in the region.

In Mexico, for five years Netflix had access to over three thousand hours of programming coming from Televisa's vaults, including many classical telenovelas. These were obviously not the only content on the Mexican site but a report by Forbes from 2014 stated that telenovelas like *Rebelde* and *Teresa* were among the most watched (Morales, 2014).

In early 2016, Televisa announced the launch of its own SVOD service, called Blim, where it would offer all of its popular content exclusively (Solís, 2016). Later that year Televisa revealed that it would take off all of its content from Netflix. The American company replied with an advertising spot that became viral, where it poked fun at the "loss" it would suffer. *El País* published a description of the ad:

The video shows a preppy-looking young man with slicked-back hair, buttoned-up shirt and a high-pitched voice. He looks devastated. A young woman walks into the room.
— What is it, my love? Why the long face?
— Netflix took off my favorites series...
This is the beginning of the Netflix Latin America ad explaining that the streaming content company has just parted ways with Mexico's main television station, Televisa… The break-up means that Netflix no longer offers the content that Televisa was supplying, mostly telenovelas... The message is clear: "We are eliminating the telenovelas, but leaving you other much more interesting series". That is why the woman concerned about the preppy guy thinks that Netflix has canceled *Breaking Bad*, *Stranger Things* or *Orange is the New Black*. But no, he is crying over *Rebelde*, a Mexican telenovelas for teens. Netflix is saying goodbye to Televisa and saying "I don't need you", as though it were a romantic break-up (Reina, 2016a).

Televisa tried to soften the blow with its own spot, highlighting the benefits of Blim, promoting the narco telenovela *El Señor de los Cielos*, and claiming that Blim did care for the fans of *Rebelde* (Reina, 2016b). Telenovelas, then, became the point of contention over what kind of systems would Netflix and Blim become in Mexico: the first one presenting itself as a more global alternative, and the second one reclaiming Televisa's traditional public.

There was some deliberation about Netflix's fate after losing all those Televisa's telenovelas but it is not possible to know for sure if there was any substantial reduction in viewing hours or subscriptions because the company does not reveal such data. However, what seems clear is that after the separation, Netflix managed to keep some licensed content that maintained a degree of cultural proximity.

Even before the break-up, the service was carrying telenovelas such as *Camelia la Texana* (Khatchatourian, 2014) and other Latin American successes. Later, it would carry its co-production with Univision titled *El Chapo*, riding the wave of popularity for series about drug traffic (Toussaint, 2018). More recently, it included biographical telenovelas about Mexican artists with regional appeal, such as *José José: El Príncipe de la Canción* and *Hasta Que Te Conocí* about the life of singer Juan Gabriel. At some point, however, the Netflix formula for cultural proximity stopped relying on licensed content and started looking more and more self-produced.

NETFLIX'S ORIGINAL PRODUCTION FOR MEXICO

The second strategy for cultural proximity that Netflix applied in Mexico was the commission of content with local appeal, starting in 2015 with *Club de Cuervos*.

It is fitting to note that production of successful original programming for a foreign market implies a substantial economic investment and demands very sophisticated knowledge of what local audiences want. How, then, could this newcomer gain insight into the tastes of Mexican audiences so fast as to begin commissioning original content only four years after its entry? This is where algorithms can provide an advantage, because they gather relevant information to make better choices. In other words:

The secrets drawn from massive amounts of user data are taken as compelling guidelines for future content production, be it the next micro-targeted campaign ad or the next pop phenomenon (Gillespie, 2014, p. 175).

In the particular case of Netflix, Lotz had already noted by 2014 that: "As Netflix experiments with content creation, this bank of data about viewer behavior and preferences also becomes a tool for selecting themes and genres of new shows" (2014, position 2995 of 8270).

It would be simplistic to say that algorithms are some kind of magic key for cultural proximity, but they offer blueprints for licensors and producers. Netflix recognizes this in several of its quarterly reports:

Our licensing teams are expert programmers informed by more than a decade of rich data on viewer preferences and viewing habits which allows them to license an overall mix of compelling content to uniquely please Netflix members (Netflix, Inc., 2012c, p. 3).

The quote refers to a decade in the business of delivering DVDs to American households but the rationale is the same: data coming from viewers informs licensing deals and the commission of new programming. This appears to have been the case for Latin America and Mexico, giving rise to a slate of programming that continues to grow year after year. Until September 2019, Netflix had premiered sixteen titles produced for the Mexican market (Table 1).

The first non-English original production of Netflix was *Club de Cuervos*, a dramedy created by Gary Alazraki, director of one of the highest grossing Mexican films in history: *Nosotros los Nobles* (2013). The series was set in the world of soccer in the fictional provincial town of Nuevo Toledo, and it included an international cast with Brazilian, Peruvian, Argentinean and Spanish actors. The leads were Mexicans Mariana Treviño and Luis Gerardo Méndez. The main theme was the rivalry between a brother and sister that inherited a soccer team. The series used a tone that was mostly comedic but including many plot turns and tropes that were definitely melodramatic, especially during in the first season. *Club de Cuervos* was well received in Mexico and in other international markets; so, it was renewed for three more seasons

TABLE 1

NETFLIX'S ORIGINAL PRODUCTIONS FOR MEXICO FROM 2015 TO 2019

Title	Years	Seasons	Episodes	Genre
Club de Cuervos	2015-2019	4	45	Comedy
Ingobernable	2017	2	27	Drama
Cuando conocí al Chapo	2017	1	3	Documentary
*Narcos México**	2018	1	10	Drama
Club de Cuervos: La Balada de Hugo Sánchez	2018	1	6	Comedy
Club de Cuervos: Yo, Potro	2018	1	1	Comedy
*Luis Miguel: La Serie**	2018	1	13	Drama
*La Casa de las Flores**	2018	1	13	Comedy
Made in Mexico	2018	1	8	Reality show
*Diablero**	2018	1	8	Horror/Fantasy
¡Nailed it! México	2019	1	6	Reality show
Tijuana	2019	1	11	Drama
Historia de un crimen: Colosio	2019	1	8	Drama
1994	2019	1	5	Documentary
Las Crónicas del Taco	2019	1	6	Documentary
Monarca	2019	1	10	Drama

Note: Information on the year of launch, number of seasons and number of episodes comes from the Netflix website. *A second season has been already announced.

Source: the author.

and ended in 2019, with a total of 45 episodes and two spin-offs (*La Balada de Hugo Sánchez*, and *Yo, Potro*, both from 2018).

   After *Club de Cuervos* came *Ingobernable* (2017), a series starred by Kate del Castillo inspired on the Mexican political scene of the time. This series capitalized on the scandal that followed del Castillo after her meeting with the drug lord Joaquín Guzmán Loera "El Chapo", which also gave rise to the documentary series *Cuando Conocí al Chapo* (2017). *Ingobernable* was renewed for a second season in 2018. In total,

the series has 27 episodes. Although a third season was announced, it was later cancelled.

2018 was a crucial year for Netflix in Mexico, because two of its series entered into public discourse. First, *Luis Miguel: La Serie* captured the imagination of Mexican audiences and created high buzz on social media sites. This was a co-production with Telemundo that Netflix distributed outside of the United States. *Luis Miguel: La Serie* tapped into the nostalgia of the Generation X and introduced the music of the Mexican singer to Millennials. It was sold as an event, premiering an episode each Sunday on prime time. This melodramatic biopic worked as a *transmedia narrative* (Jenkins, 2006), providing multiple entry points for audiences, from the original biography on which the series was based to the gossip shows on Open-to-Air television. The songs that gave title to each episode were promoted on the radio, while live concerts by Luis Miguel became also part of the phenomenon. Particularly telling were the *memes* that circulated in social networks, which, by July 2018, placed the series in the same level of importance with the Soccer World Cup and the Mexican Presidential Elections. Although a second season for this series is expected, a launch date has not been announced yet.

The second Netflix series that found good reception in 2018 was *La Casa de las Flores*, which the company reported, had "become a big hit" (Netflix, Inc., 2018). *La Casa de las Flores* is catalogued as a comedy, but in fact is a self-conscious melodrama with an ironic twist. Renowned telenovela actress Veronica Castro, who was the face of Mexican melodrama around the world in the 1980's, plays a seemingly traditional housewife from a high-class neighborhood in Mexico City. The story revolves around a series of mishaps that send her family and business into deep crisis. The series was created by Manolo Caro, the director of successful Mexican films like *La Vida Inmoral de la Pareja Ideal* (2016). The second season of *La Casa de las Flores* was released in October 2019.

Also from 2018, *Made in Mexico* was a reality show that portrayed the opulent lives of a group of privileged socialites. The show was attacked by users of social network sites, and generally disliked by Mexican critics. It was not renewed.

The last original production from 2018 was *Diablero*, premiered on December 21st. This is a horror-fantasy series based on the book El Diablo me obligó by Mexican author Francisco Haghenbeck. The series has been already renewed for a second season.

For 2019 the local offer included: a) *¡Nailed it! México*, hosted by Omar Chaparro, a contest show that Netflix has reported to be a big success (Netflix, Inc., 2019); b) *Tijuana*, starring Damián Alcázar, about the lives of a group of journalists from the famous border city; c) *Historia de un crimen: Colosio*, focused on the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio; d) *1994*, a documentary series about one of the most troubled years in Mexican recent history, e) *Las crónicas del Taco*, a nonfiction series about the famous Mexican dish; and f) *Monarca*, a drama produced by Salma Hayek. It may be too early to evaluate the impact and success of this last group of shows in the *long tail* model of digital delivery (Tryon, 2013).

The overview of the original production for Mexico reveals that Netflix has commissioned content from several genres, such as comedy, drama, documentary and reality shows. Among the topics that prevail are: the traffic of narcotics, Mexican politics, soccer, music, and family dynamics.

Many of these Netflix's productions contain melodramatic traits, even if they belong to other genres. For instance, the focus on family is what makes series like *Club de Cuervos* and *La Casa de las Flores* close to the melodramatic tradition.[5] They also include several plot twists and characters that can be easily found in the most conventional telenovelas: for example, in both of them there are unrecognized paternities at the center of the drama. Bastardy, as Monsiváis has pointed out is a central issue in melodrama (in Quiroz & Cano, 1988, p. 197).

A similar concern with family is central to the biopic *Luis Miguel: La Serie*, which traces the story of the young musical star but obtains

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[5]   Also *Monarca* is centered on the power struggles within a family of millionaires from the Tequila industry. Although the title is marketed as a drama series, critics have noticed its similarity to the great "grave melodramas" of the past (Cueva, 2019).

most of its dramatic force from the misfortunes of the suffering mother, Marcela, and the evil deeds of the father, Luis Rey.

Ingobernable, conversely, at times feels closer to an action thriller than to a telenovela but it follows the style of *La Reina del Sur*, focusing on the romantic life of a strong female lead. Feminine desire, as it has been clearly established by scholars from the film tradition is also one of the fundamental themes of melodrama (Hayward, 2003).

From the textual analysis of those four shows, it seems clear that melodrama is pervasive in Netflix's Mexican productions, although not recognized openly. The reason behind it may be that melodrama is still strongly connected to telenovelas and they still carry the connotation of low culture, especially for those viewers that pretend to have a more global taste. Therefore, I argue that melodramatic elements are included cleverly disguised in Netflix's productions for Mexico, in order to reach to the core of the cultural matrix (Martín-Barbero, 1988) that viewers share, but without alienating those who do not conceive themselves as telenovela viewers.

NETFLIX AND MELODRAMA IN MEXICO: A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

Apparently, there are bits of melodrama in most Netflix's Mexican productions, even in the most unexpected ones: in *Cuando Conocí al Chapo* there is a sequence that explains the role of Televisa's telenovelas in Mexican culture, while in *¡Nailed it! Mexico* there is an episode called "María, the Baker" devoted to creating telenovela-inspired cookies and cakes. In comedies like *Club de Cuervos* melodrama is present in the exaggerated reactions and plot twists, while in *La Casa de las Flores* it permeates the whole narrative with its focus on family, morals and gender roles. For this last show, the melodramatic tradition becomes visible also in its exaggerated mise-en-scène.

In spite of the presence of melodramatic traits in this last program, Netflix has gone to great lengths to publicly deny that *La Casa de las Flores* is a telenovela. In August 2018 the company created a parody called *La Rosa de la Virgin*, which showed the three leading actresses from Netflix's series poking fun at the narrative devices, audiovisual

style and exaggerated acting of the top melodramatic program in Mexico called *La Rosa de Guadalupe*. In the parody, Veronica Castro says the phrase: "esto no es una telenovela" (translation: "this is not a telenovela"), but then in the final shot she blinks coquettishly at the camera while holding a rose.

This spoof is a good example of the love-hate relationship that Netflix has with melodrama, making fun of the genre but promoting it at the same time. Another example of this ambivalent position comes from 2016, before the break-up with Televisa, when Netflix created a spot for *Orange is the New Black* that starred legendary telenovela villain Soraya Montenegro (Itatí Cantoral), a character that has come to embody the excesses of Mexican melodrama in the memes that display phrases like "cries in Spanish".

It seems that Netflix is using melodrama as a repository of shared references that create emotional attachment in Mexican audiences, exploiting nostalgia for the media culture of past decades, which was mainly created by Televisa. I argue that this is the nostalgia that drove *Luis Miguel: La Serie* to success, and what stands behind the charming drag impersonations of singers Amanda Miguel, Yuri and Gloria Trevi in *La Casa de las Flores*.

Netflix is not producing melodrama in a traditional sense, but it is infusing melodrama into other genres, as part of a clever strategy to differentiate its shows from the local ones. To ensure this distinction, Netflix's shows are edgy. Internet TV in Mexico is not currently subject to censorship; hence, programming can contain nudity, crude violence, obscenity and topics that would be out of line in Mexican Open-to-Air and even on Pay-TV. Netflix's shows include transgender characters and gay relationships; they show drug dealing and consumption and talk about the taboo topics of political assassination and pervasive corruption in Mexican institutions, from soccer leagues to the higher spheres of political power. They also intend to have a regional appeal with casts that include Mexican, Spanish, Argentinian, American and Colombian performers.

For the middle class audiences that constitute the key demographic for Netflix, the proposal is to watch as an *ironic spectator* (Ang, 1985), recognizing the footprints of melodrama but deriving pleasure from this knowledge, and from the occasional break of the generic conventions.

CONCLUSIONS

"The devil is in the detail" goes the saying; and those details are what algorithms allow seeing: the minute preferences of local viewers in display for media corporations that can use them to create new engaging content.

It would be inaccurate to say that Netflix used algorithms to "discover" that melodrama was the reigning genre in Latin America. That knowledge was taken for granted by the time the service ventured into the region. Nevertheless, the confirmation of what the Mexican viewers would watch and "enjoy a lot" would only come through the analysis of their preferences regarding the local and foreign content that the platform was offering.

Using Televisa's and other regional providers' content as testing material, Netflix confirmed that melodrama was the key genre for Mexican audiences and launched itself into the distribution of local titles, the commission of content from local talent, and into original production. When it came the time to create new original content, Netflix could not just copy Televisa's formulas and produce new telenovelas that would look exactly as the traditional ones. Instead, it included melodramatic elements into comedies, political thrillers and even contest shows.

As a whole, Netflix's original programs for Mexico focus on narcos, soccer, politics, music and family. Some of the most successful ones feed on the nostalgia for the media culture that Televisa created in previous decades.

It seems that Netflix has used the recommendation algorithms to effectively adopt the formulas dearest for Mexican audiences but it is pushing those formulas into new directions, hybridizing them with others and creating new horizons of expectations for viewers.

One of the main limitations of this study is that, by focusing on Mexico, it leaves out other melodramatic traditions from Latin America that could be also "feeding" Netflix's newly acquired knowledge about the genre. Besides, it reveals the need to conduct deeper textual analysis of titles like *La Casa de las Flores* and its paratexts as transmedia expansions (e.g., memes, advertising, viewers' comments, etc.), in

order to arrive to more grounded conclusions about the ways in which melodrama is becoming part of Netflix's productions.

What seems clear now is that the use of algorithms in Mexico allowed Netflix to decode the formula for cultural proximity relatively fast, giving it a competitive advantage to influence the evolution of melodrama in the years to come, and to become a strong competitor for the dominant local producers.

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