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Television, melodrama and bio-series: Juan Gabriel, Luis Miguel, and José José

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This article examines the narrative strategies that have structured the biographical series of Juan Gabriel, Luis Miguel, and José José transmitted by television channels and streaming platforms with international influence. It focuses primarily on their retrospective stories and struggles to achieve “success”. We discussed how these storylines are reconfigured as melodramas to manage tensions about gender, sexuality, drug addiction and family.

KEYWORDS: Television, melodrama, biographical series.

Este artículo examina las estrategias narrativas que estructuran las series biográficas de Juan Gabriel, Luis Miguel, y José José transmitidas por canales de televisión y plataformas de streaming con alcance internacional. Se enfoca principalmente en sus historias retrospectivas y sus luchas por alcanzar el “éxito”. Discutimos cómo estas historias se reconfiguran como melodramas para manejar las tensiones sobre el género, la sexualidad, la drogadicción y la familia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Televisión, melodrama, series biográficas.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the long tradition of the telenovela format in Mexican television, biopic series have managed to remind us that the use of melodrama continues as “part of the job” of those who make a business of telling stories. Who could have imagined that, in only three years, television producers and channels could depend on narrating the biography of many celebrities and stars of the entertainment world?⁵

Despite the fact that telenovela continues to be the media product with the most significant national impact and international circulation in Mexico, and even though “Mexican telenovelas have served as a stage for the integration and synthesis of discursive elements, both postmodern and anachronistic” (Orozco, 2006, p.14); the production of series has not lost one bit of its capacity to articulate the melodrama to the biographies of artists, to subject their lives to intense public exposure by the media industry. Like melodrama, were the gestures or traits representing the morality of each character stand out –as a way of theatrical reconversion (Martín-Barbero, 1987)–, biopic series represent not only the continuation and renewal of that melodrama for those who have dedicated their careers to achieving fame but an innovative product to re-package and market music.

Why have the biopic series portraying the life of musical artists acquired such relevance? Are they simply the expression of a television and streaming market in search of global audiences? Or perhaps its prominence is more related to the memory and tastes of audiences

⁵ Fictional bioseries like *Juan Gabriel* (*Hasta que te conocí*, TNT, 2016); *Joan Sebastian* (*Por siempre Joan Sebastian*, Televisa, 2016); *Celia Cruz* (*Celia Cruz*, Fox Telecolombia, 2016); *Jenny Rivera* (*Su nombre era Dolores, la Jenni que yo conocí*, Univisión-TV Azteca, 2017; y *Mariposa de Barrio*, Telemundo, 2017); *Paquita la del Barrio* (*Paquita la del Barrio*, Imagen Televisión, 2017); *José José* (*José José, el príncipe de la canción*, Telemundo y Netflix, 2018); *Luis Miguel* (*Luis Miguel, La Serie*, Netflix y Telemundo, 2018); *Alejandra Guzmán* (*La Guzmán*, Imagen Televisión, 2019) among many others, are some of the cases that mark this tendency to present complex narratives, to much more demanding audiences in production quality.

who have discovered that celebrities' private lives can be a substantive source of entertainment and in many cases a reflection of their own stories? There is no doubt that the lives of public figures are profitable beyond their shows, and those who have a lot to gain by feeding events and scandals to the public sphere have little reason to stop the business. This includes the same celebrities turned producers partnering with the entertainment industry.

We would be misunderstanding the characteristics of the biopic series and their "boom" as the predominant fiction format if we only understood it as the expression of a taste for "gossip" or as the right product to generate profits for the television and music industries. The current relevance of biopic series is linked to a wider set of industrial, aesthetic and digital media transformations, contributing to the rising success of these formats that use melodrama as the main narrative strategy. Thanks to the development of television and the new digital landscape (Piñón, 2016), popular singers and their "intimate lives" are much more visible today than in the past. It is increasingly profitable for the industry and celebrities to manage their own storytelling, highlighting the aspects of their lives they want the public to notice and downplaying less favorable things, while taking advantage of the so-called "nostalgia markets" (Newland & Taylor, 2010).

This article examines the narrative strategies of the biographical series of Juan Gabriel, Luis Miguel, and José José transmitted by television channels and VoD platforms, as an emerging product offering by televised fiction. It focuses mainly on the retrospective stories of three music stars and their struggles to achieve "success". These stories are reconfigured as melodrama to handle tensions about sexuality, ethnicity, social class, drug addiction and family. The biopic series format is undoubtedly imbued in the television products offered by other musicians, including female singers and movie characters whose significance is articulated and revived in the imaginary collective memory (González, 1998). However, we selected the three national and transnational highest-selling⁶ Mexican performers whom we

⁶ According to numbers from the Latin Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, up to 2018, Juan Gabriel is the Mexican performer who has sold the most records worldwide with 150 million albums (<https://www.>

considered the most influential of the twentieth century, in an attempt to offer a framework of analysis making possible an understanding of that which “abbreviates ‘Mexicanity’, beyond its nationalist devices” (Orozco, 2006, p. 16).

BIOPIC SERIES AND MELODRAMA: CONTINUITY, RENEWAL AND INNOVATION OF THE INDUSTRIAL FORMAT

“Biopic series” is a term that appears frequently in the entertainment press and accounts for unknown aspects of the lives of artistic icons. The term relates to a “biographical novel” and “biographical series”. The notion of biopic series comes from a long cinematographic trajectory, a story whose course has preserved the connotation of the genre of biography: biopics⁷ or biographical films. Here, biopic series follow the use as a television term, a serialized or fragmented program in mini-fictions narrating the life of a famous person. “Biopic series” is also used today to describe a broader narrative form related to streaming platforms, a form that is no longer specifically linked to television codes. What is a serialized biopic in the current sense of the term? As a working definition, in this case, we could say that “biopic series” denotes a serialized program about the life of a famous public figure, which implies a certain type of narrative self-management, where the character or his family manages the visibility and the storytelling. To be more precise, we suggest that biopic series mainly refer to the events and circumstances of the lives of famous people, and have three characteristics.

The first characteristic addresses the high-quality production, meeting certain aesthetic values or codes. This is a necessary condition so that the biopic can be more “appealing” to the taste of the audience.

latingrammy.com/es), followed by Luis Miguel with 90 million, and José José with 60 million.

⁷ Biopics are movies in which the main narrative is the life of real persons rather than fictional characters (Böhnke & Machura, 2003). The word biopic started to be used more often in Hollywood movies from the 1930’s and 1940’s that emphasized famous or heroic people in a nostalgic way. (Böhnke & Machura, 2003, p. 320).

The production meets other standards to the usual ones of the open-air television. The second peculiarity refers to the heavy involvement of the musical artists in the production, the artists are the main character of the story, and the main storytellers. As a rule, famous people often try to emphasize some events and hide others, a kind of management of their visibility.

The biopic series not only presuppose a good quality of production and involvement of the people whose life is told: it also presupposes narrating with a certain degree of melodrama, almost similar to a telenovela but, in addition to the love story, it can also show events of past, public and collective when it comes to making fictions of Mexican history (Charlois, 2010). It was Martín-Barbero (1987) who said that in Latin America the melodrama had its own aesthetic as mediation, and that aesthetic came from the theater and went through radio, film, and television, where the narrative options were reduced to four stereotypes: the hero, the victim, the villain, and the fool.⁸

The rise of biopic series as a significant phenomenon that goes beyond the local is a development coinciding with the renovation (Orozco, 2006) of the telenovela “Televisa model” (Mazziotti, 2005) and the facilitation of its exacerbated consumption as a “brand merchandise” for export. Since the telenovela format –its development, production, and circulation– had been consolidated, what is appreciated today with the most recent productions of the biopic series is a more “complex” narrative (Mittell, 2006; Piñón, 2016). Such narrative fragments the story not only in episodes linked under criteria of biographical and melodramatic “redemption”,⁹ but also fragments it into songs framing the plot under sensory and musical criteria, changing the interpellation of the narrative towards the potential fan.

⁸ “Having as its central axis four basic feelings -fear, enthusiasm, pity, and laughter- they correspond to four types of situations that are at the same time sensations -terrible, exciting, tender and burlesque-” (Martín-Barbero, 1987, p. 128), and that usually come together with different genres such as the dark novel, the epic, tragedy, and comedy.

⁹ Melodramas whose characters are redeemed by suffering and their past conformed with essences of class, gender, and universal values: the struggle as a strategy of the poor to make legitimate progress in life (Orozco, 2006).

NARRATIVE OF THE NOVEL SERIES: THE BIOPIC SERIES

Each aspect of the biopic series can be analyzed through a particular phase of textual analysis or “symbolic forms” (Thompson, 1998) combined in this case with narrative perspective (Fisher, 1987; Sellnow, 2016). Thus, we can develop the analysis of the series’ narratives and place the interpretation of their melodramatic character in a general approach. The study of media narratives is essential because it examines “the structural features by virtue of which they are complex symbolic phenomena, capable of mobilizing meaning” (Thompson, 1998, p. 445).

In this case, the narrative perspective focuses on the nature and life of human beings through storytelling, including narratives of popular culture with characters, plot, and actions.¹⁰ For Fisher (1987), narratives are subject to rational assessments, coherence, and fidelity. The value of the story is sought to be “true”, when evaluating these two aspects. Thus, the consistency to assess the credibility or plausibility of the story. Fidelity is defined as the level to which the values offered in a story reflect what we consider as truthful and humane. The story has fidelity when it provides good reasons to accept its moral, worldview and values of the audience.

In this way, the analysis can explain various dimensions of the narratives: the setting, the characters, the “narrator”, the events, the causal and the temporal relationships. The setting describes the space where the action takes place, and sometimes it can be in one or several spaces. In the case of the biopic series, the quality of production and scenography serves to determine the story as valid and real, in terms of coherence and fidelity. The characters present certain physical and psychological features, but these can change during the story due to the actions in which they get involved. The characters can be predictable in their actions according to social norms. For example, the “villain” of

¹⁰ Thus, Fisher’s proposal allows us to analyze the “moral of the story and the good reasons offered to support that particular ideological perspective as valid” (Fisher, cited in Sellnow, 2016, p. 54). In general terms, as the symbolic actions -words and/or works- that have consequences and meaning for those who live and interpret it.

the story could be stereotypically “bad”. The narrator is also considered in the analysis because at times the story is communicated directly to the audience. This way, the viewer acts as a witness in events mediated by a narrator who offers an interpretation of these events and characters to the audience.

Fisher (1987) proposes to analyze the important events of the narrative, the big ones shaping the story, and the small ones, bringing depth and complexity to it. There are two categories of events to know if there are structural features that can help explain the appeal of a narrative: active events (expressing action) and stationary events (expressing a state or condition).

Like most analyses, the narrative perspective is made up of looking for causal and temporal relationships. Causal relationships seek the cause and effect of human action, by accident or by forces of nature (Sellnow, 2016). Temporal relationships analyze the order of events: if they are syntagmatic (if one thing leads naturally to another) or paradigmatic (if flashbacks and flash-forwards are used).¹¹ In the biopic case, the flashbacks are recurring, and the analysis considers the details that are provided as one event compares to other events, and their significance. It starts by:

Determining what moral lesson is conveyed, that is, what is the story trying to convince us about how we ought to or ought not to believe or behave? Then point out which elements seem to be most important in terms of contributing to ultimate value-laden argument and why... some moral examples include “good triumphs over evil”, “perseverance will pay off at the end”... in other words, it shows how they provide good reasons for accepting the moral message as legitimate (Sellnow, 2016, p. 61).

The analysis of the biopic series narrative allows us to see how these successful productions repeatedly tell stories about the performers and

¹¹ Biopic series are a good example of paradigmatic stories because most of the time they are told at different times, usually in the past and present. Thus, biopic series almost always start with the past, because they are structured as biographies.

their family and love relationships. Biopic series tell their viewers that an artist, although successful and famous, needs the care of a person who really loves them. Juan Gabriel, José José, and Luis Miguel have that in common but their paths and experiences are very different.

JUAN GABRIEL: WHAT YOU CAN SEE, DOES NOT NEED TO BE QUESTIONED

Hasta que te conocí (Until I met you), a biopic series narrating the life of singer-songwriter Juan Gabriel, was the first one of its kind, and the one that created an international trend. With 13 episodes, lasting fifty minutes each, it was produced by Disney and distributed by TNT Latin America. As an example of narrative self-management, Juan Gabriel himself narrates the story, including the relevant songs, and was directly involved in the production of the series, which were based on a series of interviews by producer Mary Black Suárez.¹² Juan Gabriel's story is interesting from different identity and melodramatic angles. Since he became famous at the beginning of the 1970's he was open to his public about his humble origins.¹³ Juan Gabriel reaches public notoriety

¹² The episodes aired on April 18th, 2016 on TNT Latin America. In Mexico, the biopic aired in TV Azteca from July 10th to August 28th of the same year. Paradoxically, the last day of the transmission of the series, the artist had a fulminant heart attack and died in Santa Mónica, California. Millions of people lamented his death in social media and mass media widely covered the funerary services.

¹³ In a colonized society with very little social mobility, power and success are often achieved with family connections, corruption or closeness to political and economic elites. For Juan Gabriel, acknowledging that he came "from below" could have been interpreted as a sign of weakness or lack of aspiration. It is relatively recent that prominent and famous people in Mexico publish their personal stories stating their humble origins, either real or manufactured. This is a way of imitating the Anglo-Saxon individualist myth of the self-made person who achieves great success moving from poverty to opulence called "rags to riches" (Booker, 2004) very common in the Hollywood entertainment industry.

after overcoming economic marginalization and continued his career struggling against a homophobic society, something that was not easy for him.

The first six episodes, directed by Alvaro Curiel, transmitted from April 18th to May 9th of 2016, portray Juan Gabriel's family, childhood and early adulthood. The first episode "El Recién Llegado" (The one just arriving), opens using a paradigmatic device starting a retrospective to the year 1929, when Gabriel and Victoria, the parents of Alberto Aguilera Valadéz –the birth name of Juan Gabriel– met, and then get married in Parácuaro, Michoacán, procreating ten children. The chapter closes using the causal narration as a resource explaining the exodus of the family to Ciudad Juárez and their precarious existence there. The episode shows the gradual deterioration of Gabriel's mental health, until he is seen setting fire to several corn fields in his town, an event that the community condemns and punishes,¹⁴ and his desperation when he is confined to a hospital for the mentally ill.

In Ciudad Juárez, Victoria is seen working odd jobs, while her other children perform menial activities for money and take care of each other for survival. After a few years and several neglecting incidents, Victoria decides to put Alberto, the youngest of her children, in a correctional facility called "El Tribunal". Is in this place where he meets Juan Contreras "Juanito", his musical mentor whom he respects as a father figure. Juanito directs the carpenter's workshop and is with him

¹⁴ A council integrated by several elderly males and other leaders in the town get together to decide Gabriel's punishment for the damage caused by his actions. Gabriel's father and his wife Victoria defend him and instead of time in jail, the council decides that he should be put in "La Castañeda", a hospital for the people mentally ill located in Mexico City. The representation of the town council, which reflects indigenous uses and traditions, is an acknowledgment to the indigenous surroundings and Juan Gabriel's family itself, represented by his mother and the women in Purépecha who sing in Purépecha language. However, the series state that the community is not benevolent with the Aguilera Valadez family, because the community also determines to take away their land for ten years as a payment for the damage caused by the fire set by Gabriel.

that Alberto starts singing and writing songs. It is also Juanito who reads Alberto's first poem called "The dove's death" which would turn to be his first song. At the end of episode five, it is possible to see a very skillful 14-year old teenager escaping from "El Tribunal" to start living his own life.¹⁵

In the same way he did it in his private life, selectively performing narrative self-management, the biopic uses discrete and non-explicit melodramatic moments to suggest Juan Gabriel's sexual and affective preferences.¹⁶ In episode four, when Alberto is still very young, his friend and roommate at "El Tribunal", Hugo, is being moved to another area of the institution. When they are hugging goodbye, Alberto places a long kiss on Hugo's cheek, something to what Hugo reacts by pushing away Alberto and threatening to hit him. The scene ends when Hugo leaves in a car while Alberto sadly waves his hand from a window. In episode seven titled "First Call" Alberto, then using the artistic name of "Adán Luna" is trying his luck in Mexico City's artistic scene. Already as a young man, Alberto is portrayed living with Tomás, a friend he

¹⁵ Young Alberto works different jobs in Ciudad Juárez, at the time that he looks for his mother and is rejected several times by her. As time goes by, Alberto continues singing, travels with the chorus of a Christian church to California, where he lives with an African American family, but eventually, already grown up, goes back to the night life of Juárez where he starts singing using the name of "Adán Luna". The parallel themes of the struggle for artistic success with so much optimism and perseverance, while suffering the abandonment and lack of love from his mother, and the generosity, sincerity and early maturity that he achieves due to life challenges, will be the moral values guiding the story as well as the themes of some of the songs Juan Gabriel composed in real life (Del Moral, 2014).

¹⁶ Juan Gabriel was very dedicated to the self-management of his narrative in the media. Not only it was his philosophy not to let himself to be too exposed in interviews or public presentations in order to "make himself desirable and missed by his public" but also kept his sexual life out of his official story as much as he could. Although his public life was not free from scandals and rumors coming from men who said were Juan Gabriel's sentimental partners at different times.

meets at a party. Even though the scenes do not show Alberto and Tomás in passionate situations, the daily care they provide to each other suggests the possibility that they were more than friends.¹⁷

Episodes eight and nine show a struggling young Alberto as he tried to achieve success in Mexico City. He is seen sleeping on the street and rounding the theaters where famous artists such as Lola Beltrán and José Alfredo Jiménez performed. It is particularly interesting the relationship that Alberto develops with Lola Beltrán's assistant, Nereo, which suggests close contacts with the gay community of the time.¹⁸ Issues ranging from social tensions to family drama Juan Gabriel faced due to his sexual preferences are illustrated in the biopic. For example, in episode six a scene shows Juan Gabriel being beaten by one of his brothers who is following their mother's orders to "turn him into a real man". In another scene, his artistic director suggests to him to "ease the flamboyance" before a presentation in Venezuela, something that causes him so much nervousness and ends up interfering with his customary fluidity and natural communication with the public, ruining the performance.¹⁹

"Nothing has been easy to Juan Gabriel, but success" is the phrase that Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis (1990) coined to describe the life of the singer. A success that positions someone coming from the

¹⁷ In a scene, Tomás and Alberto have a fight and Alberto leaves the apartment for a few days. Upon returning, a strange young man opens the door to receive him, he interprets it as a sign to leave Tomás alone. This scene suggests a sentimental breakup, although not in an explicit way.

¹⁸ In a clear difference with the contemporary Hollywood portrayals of upper middle-class gay men who "come out of the closet" as a ritual of passage, Juan Gabriel never "came out of the closet" publicly, as neither he does in the series. Among other things, the prejudices of a macho Mexican society, in which mannerisms or suspicions of being gay could have been causes for violence against him.

¹⁹ Juan Gabriel was never "inside the closet" so he never really had to come out of it. In the year 2002 journalist Fernando del Rincón asked him in an interview for the TV program *Primer Impacto*: "Is Juan Gabriel gay?", Juan Gabriel, visibly tense, answers: "Why are you so interested on this? People say that what you can see, does not need to be questioned".

margins of society into the center of popular culture in Mexico and Latin America. Despite of not fitting the norm of dominant masculinity, Juan Gabriel was the most popular person in Mexico for several decades.²⁰ The public presence of Juan Gabriel helped to open spaces for the expression of class and gender diversity in a country where machismo, classism and discrimination are rampant. Juan Gabriel sang ranchero music with a mariachi band and in full charro garb, dominating this famous genre and even transforming it by adding the subgenre of ranchero ballad. The public learned to both appreciate and to make his voice and unique style essential in Ranchero music, a genre known for advancing dominant masculinity narratives, and one Juan Gabriel's presence helped to diversify.

As it has been discussed to this point, *Hasta que te conocí* deals with many instances of gender identity tension. However, the main theme of this biopic is the relationship between Juan Gabriel and his mother. It can be seen how the singer lived his life compensating his mother's abandonment and emotional detachment by fostering close relationships with women who protected and acted as mother figures to him. The series show how he would demonstrate his gratitude to some of these women.²¹ In the same way that Juan Gabriel never publicly

²⁰ Many people, young and old, have sung and danced his simple but artistically sensitive and masterful songs, in which not only romantic love, but love to people and life, are recurrent themes (Del Moral, 2014). As an example of this is the song "Querida" that lasted 18 months as number one of the top radio songs in Latin America, and sold more than 15 million albums, 10 million only in Mexico (Oleg, 2015).

²¹ For example, when he sings in "El Noa Noa" bar in Ciudad Juarez, a woman named "Meche" who worked there offers him housing and takes care of him as an older sister. In the same bar he meets Esperanza McCulley, who helps him and loves him as a mother, even while he is unjustly jailed accused of theft, Esperanza sends money to bail him out. Is in jail where he meets singer Enriqueta Jiménez "La Prieta Linda" while she is giving a concert there. Juan Gabriel gives her one of his songs to record, and then she advocates for his case to be reconsidered by the authorities. When he finally is freed from jail, is "La Prieta Linda" who helps with his incorpora-

acknowledged his sexual preferences, he also created in his songs a loving myth around his mother, although his relationship with her was always full of tensions. He dedicated many of his songs to Victoria, even the very popular “Querida”, and his song “Amor Eterno” which portrays the melodrama of the devoted child suffering the loss of his mother. On episode eleven, when Juan Gabriel is already very famous, he offers “Amor Eterno” to the Spanish singer Rocío Dúrcal, telling her that he composed the song honoring his mother who died in 1974, and wants Dúrcal to sing it. In reality, the last scene of episode thirteen, bearing the name of the series, suggests that is “Hasta que te conocí” a song about disappointment and pain, and not “Amor Eterno”, a song of devotion, the one he dedicates to his mother. In the final scene, Juan Gabriel already in the cusp of his fame, prepares to fulfill his dream of singing in the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* (Palace of Fine Arts) in Mexico City, and to become the first popular music singer to perform in a place where Mexican elites were used to attend opera or classical music concerts.²²

In the dressing room, before the concert, Juan Gabriel mentally invokes all the people who have been helpful to him during his life²³ and as it turns out, they are mostly women. It is when he is walking to the stage to sing in front of this very demanding audience that Juan Gabriel sees his mother, who is sitting in the front row. It is in this scene that the audience disappears from the cloudy auditorium as he

tion into the artistic world.

- ²² Is in 1990 when Juan Gabriel would face a wave of fierce classist and homophobic criticism from the media. Even the musicians from the orchestra in *Bellas Artes*, and many members of intellectual elites considered an affront that a popular artist like him would be allowed to perform at the epicenter of national high culture (Monsiváis, 1990).
- ²³ Before the concert, in the dressing rooms, the biopic shows a scene that could be taken from a Maya Angelou’s speech in which people that have helped Juan Gabriel appear as “a rainbow on his cloud”. It is possible to see the image of his older sister Virginia, then Juanito, Meche, Esperanza, Enriqueta Jiménez, and many other parental figures that substituted the distant figure of his mother.

continues singing the song “Hasta que te conocí” with a reproachful tone to her. Interestingly, despite of this final scene, the biopic represents the character of Victoria Valadez, interpreted by Dolores Heredia, in a complex way, with great dignity and as a victim of circumstances of a tragic and difficult life. Victoria is the most important character in the life of Juan Gabriel, and he used this relationship, the circumstances that the Aguilera Valadez family endured, and the struggles that he had to overcome in order to be famous, as inspiration enabling him to turn his tragedy into art.

LUIS MIGUEL: “I HATE YOU, LUISITO REY”

Luis Miguel, The Series aired its first season from April to July, 2018, and it took place over 13 chapters lasting fifty minutes. Each new episode premiered on Sunday nights. The series was backed by the singer himself and was produced by Gato Grande Productions and Metro Goldwyn Mayer.²⁴ Television critics noticed in *Luis Miguel, La Serie* the saturation of the “sober realism of peak TV” (Cueva, 2018) and invariably diagnosed the “pure and hard melodrama (stylization, archetypal characters)” (Boullosa, 2018) as a symptom of the narrative ways of Mexican television; while the writer of the series, Daniel Krauze, acknowledged the melodrama, but with a turn towards the quality of production.²⁵ The history of the series addresses the growth of Luis Miguel from his childhood to reach success and popularity as a singer. It also addresses the complicated relationship of abuse and exploitation of the singer by his father, Luis Gallego, better known as “Luisito Rey”; and the mysterious disappearance of his mother, Marcela Basteri. Each episode of the first season had a song by Luis Miguel as a framework to emphasize a life experience: musical successes such

²⁴ It was broadcast in Spain, Mexico, and Latin America by Netflix, while in the United States and Puerto Rico, on the Telemundo television network. Several friends of the singer participated as investors in the series, including Miguel Alemán and Antonio Cúe.

²⁵ “It’s a melodrama. And I believe, in effect, that it functions as an exhaust valve to another era. Both elements influence your success, no doubt. But, modesty aside, I think it also helps that it is well-done” (Boullosa, 2018).

as “Cuando calienta el sol”, “Culpable o no”, “La incondicional”, among others.

The serialized narrative of Luis Miguel’s life is represented through child abuse and exploitation, which emanates from a tradition of social realism (strategy to attract spectators with increasingly spectacular stories in a competitive industry), and which is combined with a melodrama by way of privileged narration for the expression of the conflict as a “place of ideological struggle to handle tensions over power, sexuality and the family, which have become the place of social anxieties in the wide coverage of the media of cases of child abuse” (Franco, 2013, p. 268). This case, in particular, questions the family as an institution and calls the attention to the nature of domestic and gender-based violence and abuse.

From the first chapters, the series shows the suffering of Luis Miguel or “Micky” at the hands of his father, Luisito Rey, a frustrated artist who uses him as a resource to work in the music industry. Throughout the episodes, Luisito Rey abuses the child and the adolescent Luis Miguel: From medicating him with pills against fatigue, subjecting him to demanding worknights in cabarets and parties organized by Mexican politicians, to getting him prostitutes and cheating him with disadvantageous contracts.²⁶ The fight between good against evil or Luis Miguel against Luisito Rey is exemplified in these characters through the use of flashbacks, through causal relationships, which explain the indifferent reaction of a young and mature Luis Miguel to the news of the death of his father in the first scene of the series. This narrative resource materializes with other events both in the disappearance of his mother and along his vital trajectory as the main character.

For Luis Miguel fans, who were intrigued for the artist’s private life for years and captivated by his charisma and physique (Monsiváis, 1995), the narrative offers information and privileged access to the

²⁶ While still young, the character tries to accept the costs of parental decisions, while these personal traumas go somewhat unnoticed, at first, by his mother Marcela. This emphasis on the painful secrets of the child, adolescent and young artist, coupled with the great mystery of his mother’s whereabouts, represent key features of the melodramatic narrative maximizing empathy and the identification from the Latin American audience.

point of view of the victim-hero, who fights against his emotional loyalty to free himself from his father, while suffering his mother's absence. Allegedly, Luisito Rey himself had something to do with her disappearance. *Luis Miguel, The Series*' first season introduces at least two stories of child and domestic abuse that shaped the narrative: the exploitation and abuse of Luis Miguel, and domestic violence against his mother, Marcela. All by the "villain" of the story, a kind of Stromboli (Cueva, 2019) who, with his disruptive actions, disintegrates the "harmony" of the vulnerable family.

Luisito Rey the perpetrator, is a complex character, not so much a "full-fledged" villain. Throughout the 13 chapters, the character transforms from a self-confident man on top of the world to an almost tragic man (personal communication with Daniel Krauze). Luisito Rey is marked as distinct from the Mexican community in terms of his Spanish identity, however, he complies as a character with the conventions of the Mexican melodrama: The macho, authoritarian, exploitative, irresponsible father figure who makes his wife and son suffer to tears.²⁷

Marcela Basteri, of Italian origin, represents the self-sacrificing mother, strong, understanding, loyal, and capable of doing everything for her children regardless of whether her dignity is humiliated even by herself. In the third chapter, "I don't live without you", Luisito Rey offers his wife to Arturo "El negro" Durazo, an obscure character in Mexican politics, in exchange for his son singing at the wedding of President José López Portillo's daughter. He also wants Durazo to help "Micky" with connections so he can sing at one of the most-watched programs of Mexican television during the 1980's, *Siempre en domingo*.²⁸

Luis Miguel, as a character, is introduced in the series in three parallel times: as a child (10 to 12 years old), as a teenager (13 to 16 years old) and as a young man (17 to 21 years old). The first chapter shows a successful 17-year-old Luis Miguel, played by Diego Boneta, with a diligent desire for romance. Luis Miguel, the proverbial seducer,

²⁷ A melodrama that is very similar to the iconic film of the Mexican cinema *La Oveja Negra* (1949) with Pedro Infante and Fernando Soler.

²⁸ Although the sexual favor does not culminate on the screen (it remains a rumor), it is established that Marcela is "almost a saint", the defenseless mother who suffers from her husband's prostitution attempts.

is initially represented as a naive, well-intentioned character with a desperate interest in gaining the approval of his father and manager. In the same episode, Luisito Rey emotionally blackmails Luis Miguel when editing the video of the song “Cuando calienta el sol” the episode’s title, to remove his son’s girlfriend from it and render her irrelevant during a grand exhibition in Acapulco. Luis Miguel, who finally fails to defend himself against such an outrage, opts for self-denial to keep the peace.

The representation of the victim-hero, concurrent from a broader cultural repertoire of melodramatic and media narratives, in which children are presented as always respectful and in charge of the happiness of others in their family, even at the expense of their own, is reinforced by several parallel stories revolving around abuse. In episode six, “Mother, mother”, Luisito Rey introduces Luis Miguel to the world of addictions at age twelve. Luisito unleashes his frustration when he discovers a reluctant Luis Miguel who forgets his dialogues in the middle of filming *Ya nunca más* (1984), his first film, due to fatigue. Unable to let his son rest from strenuous filming and nightly shows without leaving school aside; Luisito Rey bribes his child’s doctor and asks him to prescribe ephedrine to Luis Miguel as if it was a vitamin.

These tensions make their way through increasingly complicated scenarios, including the traumatic first sexual experience of a 14-year-old Luis Miguel. In episode 8, “Someone like you”, Luisito Rey hires a prostitute for his son, circumventing a year of work in the complicated stage of the singer’s voice change and his difficulty in reaching musical tones while performing. All this in order to advance his “vocal maturation” due to the recommendation of a speech therapist to stop singing for a year and take care of his vocal cords. Luisito Rey orchestrated the sexual encounter so that his son would not interrupt his performances.

In the context of the commitment of *Luis Miguel, The Series* with the spirit of the narrative of “rags to riches” (Booker, 2004) when the protagonist acquires power and wealth, in some cases losing everything, the ambitions of both Luisito Rey and Luis Miguel are considered a maximum success.²⁹ In a demonstrative fashion, this melodramatic

²⁹ However, in the case of Luisito Rey, his abusive behavior in the name of “whatever is necessary” is implicitly attributed to a spirit of overcoming

narrative projects the anxiety of power and success over the family's vulnerability of the mother, who mysteriously goes missing during the series; allowing Luis Miguel to continue on the way to the top without interfering to stop the abuse by his father. If this melodramatic narrative of abuse revolves around Luisito Rey as a perpetrator, it implies a connection between masculinity and violence, *Luis Miguel, La Serie*, resorts to biopic series for his story of "going missing". This coincides with a contemporary social climate in the news media accounting for the disappearance of women in Mexico, and its public disclosure of criminals that allow society to be interested in requesting more information, such as the development of an awareness campaign such as #NoSoloEsMarcela.³⁰

**"EL PRÍNCIPE DE LA CANCIÓN" JOSÉ JOSÉ:
I, WHO WAS THE STORM**

José José, el príncipe de la canción was produced by Estudios TeleMéxico, broadcasted from January 15th to April 6th, 2018, by Telemundo, and available on Netflix on June 1st. If the TV series *Hasta que te conocí* and *Luis Miguel, La Serie* were made up of 13 episodes, *José José, el príncipe de la canción* lasted 75 episodes of 40-50 minutes each. This is a key aspect in the structure of the narrative, a lower production standard, and a different temporality of the audience, both Telemundo and Netflix.

However, our analytical emphasis of the *José José, el príncipe de la canción*, focuses on two characteristics: self-management in the artist's narrative, and the biographical television melodrama. These are important characteristics that define bio series as one of the relevant cultural products of today. The series is shown as a melodrama of redemption (Mazziotti, 2005) inspired by the life of the Mexican singer

and "moving forward" (which leads to the father's negligence and exploitation, as suggested by the Luis Miguel's backstory).

³⁰ The Non-Violence Project (NVP) Foundation, a non-profit organization, campaigned on Twitter with the hashtag #NoSoloEsMarcela to make visible the number of missing women in Mexico.

José José, who acts as a narrator himself communicating directly with the audience (Sellnow, 2016). José José tells his audience the life of “an artist with a tormented soul who in his permanent search for love and glory, was taken from heaven to hell by the hand of music” (Filmaffinity, 2018) or the story of a character who ascends to fame involved in a fight against alcoholism. The story was similar to the movie *Gavilán o Paloma* (1985) where the emergence of the music icon is narrated from its humble beginnings to international fame.

The development of the series is linear and chronological, except for certain flashbacks recalling José Sosa’s –José José’s real name– past mistakes, but these errors are transformed into what has been the tragedy of the Mexican melodrama, the current and universal fight against alcoholism. This moral approach is fundamental in melodramatic construction where there is clear opposition between good and evil (López, 2011),³¹ in the life events of the singer, and that in the end, take him into a path towards rebirth or “rebirth as a hero” (Booker, 2004).³² This rectification is generally given through an external force –Sarita, José José’s third wife, would be responsible for giving a new meaning to the singer’s life–.

The series is divided into three transcendental events: rise to success, fall to hell, and redemption. The rise to success begins in the first episodes of the series portraying young José Sosa and his family. These episodes portray family conflicts with a moral background typical of the Mexican middle class in the seventies, showing the experiences of his parents and brother in addition to the alcohol addiction of his father, who was also a singer named José Sosa Esquivel. According to the narrator, is a neurotic: “I couldn’t understand why, after educating his ear, his father was not willing to allow Sosa to become a singer”. The

³¹ “It implies recognition, understanding, and acceptance by the audience of this natural, credible and universal struggle. To the extent that this opposition reinforces a significant moral framework for the cultural moment, all psychosocial processes that lead the audience to get involved in history will be activated” (López, 2011, p. 170).

³² The protagonist, having lost everything, critically faces an error to amend the path.

series shows how José Sosa Esquivel, while teaching his children to enjoy music, also forbids them to dedicate themselves to the profession for fear of moral and economic suffering.

The context of the economic struggles of the family shown in episode 1 is important for the construction of the character. José José shows an early inclination to provide for his family, offering to pay off debts through his then incipient income as a musician: “we have always been used to thread water up to our neck”, he says bluntly.

On the other hand, the mother’s character, Margarita Ortiz, embodies the values of protection and unconditional love in addition to the most complete self-denial. José José’s devotion to his mother is evident throughout the story. In episode 60 he even invites her to live with him in Miami, offering her to relax after a life of hard work. Margarita rejects the offer because she “must” stay to “take care of Gonzalo (José José’s younger brother), the grandchildren, and her own small restaurant”. Margarita proudly recognizes that her son is in good health. Sometime later, while in Miami José José will receive the news of his mother’s death, and he will remember her as a model Mexican woman-mother: self-sacrificing and caring to the family.

The second phase of the series accounts for José José’s rise to fame and his personal descent towards addictions, including his romances with Kiki Herrera and his second wife, Anel Noreña. At this time, José José is described as an excellent “caregiver and provider” by both women, who use these traits in his character to morally and economically take advantage. In this period, José José is both emotionally vulnerable and widely successful in his career. Although this brings terrible consequences to his life, from sentimental breakups, to embezzlement and an increased addiction to alcohol. This phase culminates with a ruined José José, living on the street with his homeless friends, the so-called “squad”.

In the third moment of the story, José José’s friends rescue him from the street to take him to a rehabilitation center in the United States. It is from this moment when he meets his third wife, Sarita, a Cuban woman who redeems and helps him return to success. The closing of the story is achieved with him being sober, despite having lost his voice, receiving the affection of the public who symbolically gives him the title of idol. Again, it is the voice of the singer himself mixed in the

fictional narrative who accompanies the events of the story, holding the reflections and explanatory notes directed in the first person for his audience.

In these three major phases, the artist's songs work in most scenes for ornamentation and as reinforces for the dramatic approach without necessarily having a chronological relationship with the author's musical production or with his biography. In the case of the renaissance narrative, the hero has fallen into a very concrete misfortune, identified with the daily experience of thousands of stories of second chances in which some of them get rid of alcoholism and drug addiction. The hero recognized as *El Príncipe de la Canción* (The Prince of Song), resurfaces from the tragedy of his excesses by the force of love.

The characters around the protagonist show an emotional development that can be seen in the narrative temporality, motivated by a basic impulse to fight for oppositions. They unravel the emotions that will be a guide for the viewer, beyond the result already guessed many times from the starting point (all fans know the story of José José). López (2011) considers this quality as one of the main ones for the commercial success of Latin American melodrama.

Tensions of the story are embodied by female characters, some of them conflicting³³ and others, a key piece for the singer's regeneration and redemption process. Sara Salazar, who introduces herself as a loyal friend of the singer and whom he attends during her stay at the rehabilitation center, is the image of the loving and understanding woman, hardworking, decent, and at the same time strong in order to support the recovery of José José.

In this biopic series, the life of the reborn hero is narrated in the

³³ Kiki Herrera, José José's first wife, represents the excess and sensuality in contrast to the moral values "José José received at home", that is, the temptation of the forbidden, sex, alcohol and drugs of the nightlife that accompanied his rise to fame. His second wife, Anel Noreña, is described in the series as a person who represents constant greed, voracity, excessive ambition and envy for fame never obtained in her career as a model and actress. In the biopic series, "she is seen as a person addicted to amphetamines and prostitutes herself" ("Anel explota contra José José", 2018).

context of Judeo-Christian culture of forgiveness and redemption, showing José José's own life as a living testimony. Similarly, it is also narrated with the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as a construct of faith among addicts with a great example of successfully fulfilling the moralizing sense of melodrama and, incidentally, with the traditional model of the Mexican telenovela.

The hero of the biopic series aims to achieve universal success as a singer. His father, also a singer, lost his life in the same search.³⁴ The hero hits rock bottom, and when it seems that everything is lost he is rescued by true love, embodied by Sarita Salazar, his last wife, who accompanied and supported him in his fight against addiction. José José embodies a will capable of holding the jaws of a lion with bare hands, acquiring its strength exalted by pure love, the only one capable of giving meaning to every struggle. The end of the series shows José José telling his story during the tribute received at the 2008 Grammys. After narrating the worst of the tragedies that a singer can live, the loss of his voice, gets up in the center of the stage and sing his song "Seré"³⁵ to be cheered by the audience.

DISCUSSION

We have noted that electronic mass media such as Televisa, TV Azteca, Telemundo, TNT, and streaming platforms such as Netflix or Blim enable conditions in which musical icons of yesteryear become more

³⁴ The monster defeating José Sosa Esquivel is alcoholism, the same enemy that José José faces with a strong will. However, he would not be able to do it alone. Fame and fortune hide other dangers, and along the way, there appear false helping hands, false lovers that just contribute to sink the hero more and more by encouraging his alcoholism through stormy and hedonic relationships.

³⁵ This song explains the feeling of José José: "I will be the one who gave everything to succeed, leaving his life broken to pieces. I will be a dream that was fulfilled, a colt that nobody tamed, only the years". The fight is thus terminated, not without visible wounds, against the monster of alcoholism, declaring itself a willful winner.

recognizable and relatable, who can speak “directly” to their audiences, and with whom the public can sympathize. The audiovisual nature of these media, the technology to transmit at all times and places, and the ability to continue, renew and innovate the television melodrama of biographies, provide producers with possibilities of celebrity-brand consolidation and possibilities of convergence of narratives, songs, concerts that allow the use of other media and platforms. Biopic series, we argue, allow accentuating the familiarity symbols of life itself such as the domestic environment, personal anecdotes, the creation and production of songs, loving couples; and seek to achieve a mediated intimacy that can be difficult to establish in the same way, and on the same level with other narrative strategies, and music marketing.

The inclusion of songs in the narrative, more intentional in the case of Juan Gabriel and Luis Miguel, than the José José series, was inseparable from the business activities of the television and streaming industry. The role of music was fundamental, and its effect on the stories was so pervasive that it is difficult to imagine what the series of these artists would be without their songs. Episode by episode the biopic series presented us with a constant flow of songs, related to the events that occurred beyond the situation. The songs became common reference points for the millions of viewers who likely shared, by their participation in a mediated culture, common musical experience and collective memory. Even when the songs have existed for many years, as in the case of the three music icons, today these songs are interwoven with the series, and the music is widely supported by television and Internet platform industries: these industries not only commit to the narrative as a strategy, the transmission and financial-marketing support; but also, with the active transformation of formats by intertextuality.

Spotify, a streaming platform for digital and music services, recorded an increase of 1905% in average streams per day after the end of the series “Hasta que te conocí”. According to *La Razón* magazine (2019) Juan Gabriel maintains the record of the highest number reproductions for a Mexican artist.³⁶ Another record, was 4000% increase in the

³⁶ On August 29th, 2016, the day after his death, Juan Gabriel’s songs were streamed 7 million times a month for several months. His most-streamed

streaming of the “Culpable o no” song from *Luis Miguel, La Serie*, after the broadcast of an episode with the same name. Also, during the transmission of the episodes, all the songs experienced greatly increased streaming activities.³⁷ Every month, 6 500 000 Spotify users listen to José José songs. One of the songs promoted by the series was “El Triste”, even with the recreation of the stage and dress when he first sang it in the early 1970’s, and the song has been streamed 54 million times (Rodríguez, 2019).

There is no doubt that, with the advent of biopics in the cinema and biopic series in television and streaming, it has been facilitated what we can describe as an emerging television format.³⁸ The non-repetition of the events narrated in the life of Juan Gabriel, Luis Miguel, and José José seems to be unrelated; however, they are ascribed to biographical codes and recurrences that allow us to limit their analysis in narrative terms:

An “autobiography” of the vital story (Genette, 1989), similar to the cinema, that is, the collusion between the narrator and character seen directly in *Hasta que te conocí* and *José José, príncipe de la canción* and involved in *Luis Miguel, La Serie*. Every series portrayed these characters as exceptional for their talent, but as common people in their personal lives.

The television melodramatic strategy postulating the reduction of multiple characters from narration to a matrix of only a few (hero, victim, villain, fool) under their functionality (Martín-Barbero, 1987).

songs are: “Abrázame muy fuerte” with 43 million reproductions, “Querida” with 38 million and “Hasta que te conocí” with 24 million reproductions.

³⁷ “Luis Miguel breaks records on Spotify thanks to his biopic series with Netflix” (Huston, 2018), with songs “Cuando calienta el sol” (50%), “Soy como quiero ser” (993%), “Yo que no vivo sin ti” (500%).

³⁸ Nine years ago, Rincón prophesied, “the television that will come will have to have the narrative wisdom of the telenovela, the patience and realism of the documentary, the aesthetic force of fiction, the seductive talk of the talk-show and the adrenaline of ‘reality’. There will be televisions, not a television” (Rincón, 2011, p. 49).

Emphasis on employing narrative strategies to present the main character as someone the audience can identify with. A kind of melodramatic self-presentation that organizes the moral lesson as a constitutive factor of visibility: be aware of “success at all costs” of the Luis Miguel series, or take care of the “monster of success”, in José José’s series, or “in success, stay humble and simple” as suggested by Juan Gabriel’s series; all in the context of “transforming human pain into art”.

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