

subject to manipulation and domination. It has been claimed that the mass media do provoke a form of amnesia by destroying the collective memory characteristic of peasant life. José Jorge de Carvalho has argued strongly that the mass media, because of what he sees as their immediacy and apparent transparency, exclude the possibility of collective memory. The culture industry 'is essentially amnesic: it offers the illusion of total and immediate participation between producer and consumer... but without the possibility of accumulation. It lacks an interpretative dimension' whereby everyday life can be transformed into experience.<sup>142</sup> By contrast, the products of folklore continue to offer that interpretative power, and in fact continue to be the predominant source of symbols for communality.<sup>143</sup> The rituals and symbolism of harvest would no doubt exemplify what de Carvalho has in mind.

While it is useful to contrast the different interpretative modes of rural and urban cultures, the problem with de Carvalho's position is that it leaves out of count how the mass media are actually received and used by their audiences, and fails to allow for the multi-layered, ambiguous and irreverent responses of popular audiences. Consider, for instance, what Carlos Monsiváis reports of the Otomi Indians of the state of Hidalgo: when the government decided to give them technology to help them organize themselves, it transpired that there was more interest in watching the videotapes of their meetings than in attending the meetings themselves: the whole community came to watch the tape.<sup>144</sup> Or there's the case of the Otomi women who had worked in the USA and whom people called 'Marías': they were asked 'why their daughters were called Jeanette, Yvonne, Deborah, Pamela instead of traditional Mexican names. The answer was that this was the only way they wouldn't be called 'Marías', which they'd had enough of, and this was why they looked for the most unfamiliar names in order to make sure their daughters were seen as individuals.' This makes plain how far certain features of popular rural cultures have been made into fixed images which no longer correspond to reality.<sup>145</sup>

### The Telenovela: From Melodrama to Farce

Media are technologies which alter the cultural field they enter: this is the manner in which they mediate.<sup>146</sup> Therefore resistance, where it occurs, cannot be resistance to new media as such, but only to their control and reception. Discussion of the media in Latin America in the 1970s was

dominated by the concept of cultural dependency, the classic text of this debate being Dorfman and Matelart's *How to Read Donald Duck*.<sup>147</sup> While being a very valuable study which brings out the blatantly imperialist tenor and hardly less blatant social chauvinism masked by the innocence of the characters of the Disney Corporation, it nevertheless makes a closed circuit between the ideological messages and their reception. The gap between ideology and everyday life also tends to be short-circuited in Matelart's studies of the media in Chile in the early 1970s. He points, for instance, to the alienating effect of advertisements for consumer goods which the majority of Chileans could never hope to purchase. Nevertheless, he seems to assume that the receivers of these images have no choice but to receive them passively, that they have no alternative representations available to them. Here social modelling and ideology have been collapsed into each other, as if people were unconscious of the disjunctions or had no way of negotiating them. The novels of Manuel Puig, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, tell a different story. Puig's characters are addicted to the stereotyping of radio serials and films, but actively collude in being manipulated, and know very well how to negotiate the gaps between the ideal and the actual: the responsibility is not solely that of the media. Puig's novels introduce desire into the equation.

In the light of this, the notion of a distinctively popular urban culture requires investigation in three main directions. In the first place, there is the question of how far earlier forms of mass culture have left traces in the contemporary culture industry, and therefore how far the latter does include a dimension of social memory. Second, there is the issue of the receiving public as actively participant in the constitution of messages, and therefore of the messages themselves as not univocal, not imposing a single or fixed interpretative key. Third, the popular is perhaps above all a space of resignification, in that the culture industry's products are received by people who are living the actual conflicts of a society and who bring the strategies with which they handle those conflicts into the act of reception. We will explore these possibilities in terms of the most famous Latin American form of mass culture, the *telenovela*. This is also the form which most extensively crosses national boundaries.

There have been many negative judgements of the *telenovela*, but one example will be enough. In his essay 'Be Happy Because Your Father Isn't Your Father: An Analysis of Colombian *Telenovelas*', Azriel Bibliowicz discusses *Manuela*, whose plot combines romantic intrigue with a social message about the nineteenth-century peasant-landlord struggles. He calls

it a 'Manicheistic construction' on the grounds that 'the "notables" who have "bad intentions" are cruel to the peasants while the mayor who is from the same social class as the "notables" has "good intentions" and wants to help them. The *telenovela* offers a simplistic analysis of the problem which is posited on the character of certain individuals and not the socio-economic reality of the country which is the real issue.'<sup>148</sup> But foregrounding the ethical and the emotional is precisely a characteristic of the popular forms (the melodramatic tradition in the theatre and the *folletin*) which historically passed into the *telenovela*. It is also a characteristic of the nineteenth-century novels, such as *Aves sin nido* (*Birds Without a Nest* 1889) which have been used for *telenovelas*. The fact that emphasis on the moral and emotional levels is a popular tradition clashes with Bibliowicz's univocal ideological reading.

We will look first at some of the relationships between the form of the *telenovela* and history, drawing mainly on Martín-Barbero's argument. The first *telenovela* in both Mexico and Brazil, the two main producing countries, was *El derecho de nacer* (*The Right to Be Born*). Transferred to television in the mid 1960s, it had originally been a radio serial produced in Cuba in 1948. The plot concerns a young lawyer trying to find out who his parents were. Melodrama involves a drama of recognition: of son by father, mother by son. Playing a major part in the intrigue is the struggle against a world of appearances and evil actions which prevents true identity being recognized. When melodrama emphasizes recognition of kinship as social being, by the same token it ignores the idea of society as a 'social pact' between rulers and ruled, that goal of liberal regimes from Bolívar onwards. 'Is there not a secret connection here between melodrama and the history of this subcontinent? Certainly melodrama's non-recognition of the "social contract" speaks loudly of the weight which that other *primordial sociality* of kinship, neighbourhood solidarity and friendship, holds for those who recognize themselves in melodrama. Must there not be some sense in raising the question how far the success of melodrama in these countries speaks of the failure of political institutions which have given no recognition to the weight of that other sociality?'<sup>149</sup>

Between the time of history, time of the great agglomerations such as the Nation, and the existential time of the individual life, family time enters as a mediation, deploying the markers of generations and differing degrees of affiliation within the extended family. The time of the family is already anachronistic, given the regulation of everyday life by work and the market ('time is money'). Nevertheless this memory of another time is essential to the reception of the *telenovela* in Latin America, since it charges plot intrigue with

a sense of the social in opposition to the dominant.<sup>150</sup> As well as its links with the *folletin*, the television melodrama also retains connections with the narrative mode of folktales, Brazilian *cordel* literature, and the chronicle of events in *corrido* and Colombian *vallenato* songs: these connections have to do with a constantly elongated narrative flow and a porousness to what is going on outside the text. A Brazilian critic has taken these claims further, with the suggestion that melodrama is a carnivalesque genre, in which author, reader and characters constantly exchange positions.<sup>151</sup>

Interviewed for a British television programme about their attitude to *telenovelas*, a group of women in Mexico City said they preferred to watch the lives of rich people, because rich people have less problems. These viewers were obviously quite aware of the distance between everyday life and the world on the screen. It is also worth mentioning that one of the older Mexican *telenovelas* was called *Los ricos también lloran* (*The Rich Also Cry*), an indication of how the classic 'rags to riches' plots, which engage a desire to resolve economic problems, combine with an effect of emotional democracy.<sup>152</sup> So although there is an undoubted emotional self-indulgence in *telenovelas*, they have another, potentially more political, side. The dynamics of popular uses of the *telenovela* are sketched out as follows by Monsiváis:

collectivities without political power or social representation . . . sexualize melodrama, extract satirical threads from black humour, enjoy themselves and are moved emotionally without changing ideologically. . . . The subaltern classes accept, because they have no alternative, a vulgar and pedestrian industry, and indisputably transform it into self-indulgence and degradation, but also into joyful and combative identity.<sup>153</sup>

To this should be added the pleasures of memory, and of sharing that memory with others – since television is not received in silence or a rapture of total possession – in the face of extraordinarily complicated plots.<sup>154</sup>

Popular reception thus already implies a tendency to resignification, which by mobilizing popular experiences and memories produces a margin of control, not over the ownership of media (this is the province of alternative media), but over their social meanings. One type of reappropriation is indicated by the *barrio* circuses in Brazil, where television characters are incorporated into older forms of entertainment which include burlesque, conjuring and acrobatic display. But mostly forms of entertainment other than television are increasingly unavailable, and it is in the changing styles of the *telenovelas* themselves that the pressures of changing contemporary social history are manifest.

Let us consider two recent productions by Televisa, the Mexican national television monopoly.<sup>155</sup> *The Strange Return of Diana Salazar*, broadcast in 1988, has as its basic plot the reincarnation in 1988 of a seventeenth-century aristocratic woman, burnt by the Inquisition as a witch. It includes the customary elements of good and evil and their misrecognition, plus a love story, but it also has the special powers of the heroine transferred to computers, thus acknowledging the growing fetishism of information technology but reappropriating it into the erotics of melodrama. This is a more complex and modern plot than the usual ones inviting the poorer sections of society to watch the moral and emotional dramas of the rich. The double historical identity of the heroine and hero, both modern and seventeenth-century, can be taken as a device to reglamourize the bourgeoisie, whose aura has drastically faded in the past decade. Monsiváis stresses that 'the current move of the *telenovela* towards the spectacle of the degradation of the bourgeoisie is connected with the impossibility of continuing to base plots on the credibility of honour and family sentiments'.<sup>156</sup> The shift reaches an extreme in *Cuna de lobos* (*Cradle of Wolves*), whose heroine is the incarnation of evil. She wears a black patch over one eye and ruthlessly murders those who get in her way, for instance by putting sugar in an aeroplane engine. But the outlandishness is a way of doing commerce with reality, with a social crisis in the real world marked by a lack of confidence in authority and higher values: in one of the murders she puts a whole phial of digitalis in a glass of orange juice, exactly the way in which the last Pope is reputed to have been murdered.

Until the early 1980s, the expanding Mexican economy had been able to offer a prospect of more or less continuous social mobility. The devastating economic crash of 1982, whose effects were compounded by the very serious earthquake which hit Mexico City in 1985, unleashed profound changes whose impact can be seen in the form taken by recent *telenovelas*. These changes have to do with increased social violence, sharpened perception of official corruption, and the crisis of the political populism which had ruled Mexico for fifty years. 'The populist State is no longer able to respond to the excessive popular demands, and is abandoning attempts to represent them.... Social struggles and movements no longer find a way out by looking upwards', as Sergio Zermeno puts it, in an article entitled 'The End of Mexican Populism'.<sup>157</sup> The Director of *Cradle of Wolves* comments that in the current crisis 'people want to identify with someone decisive with a will of iron; this is what produced the strange phenomenon whereby people identified themselves with evil, not with good'.<sup>158</sup> It was watched by the

largest audience ever known for a *telenovela* – 40 million people, that is, half the population. When the last episode was shown, the city came to a standstill; the underground drivers refused to work and everyone stayed at home. According to *Cuna de lobos*'s writer, Carlos Olmos, 'melodrama is now a farce, we can't take seriously any more the melodramatic contrasts of good and evil'. For Monsiváis, it marks a change of perception: anger at class relationships has displaced the old moral thrill, and the only future possibility is parody of the genre.<sup>159</sup> The only other thing that remains from the old *telenovela* is the pleasure in unravelling a baroque plot.

Before leaving the *telenovela* it is worth enumerating the variety of threads which converge in the process of its reception. There is the ethical emphasis, characteristic, it has been argued, of popular aesthetics. Then there is the democratic world of the emotions, where everyone is capable of the same intensity and in this sense class distinctions disappear. The emotions provide motivations for plots based on the drama of recognition. The complicated plots require considerable prowess of memory, one of the response mechanisms which is exchanged in the shared experience of viewing. Finally, the episodic structure, drawn out over several months or more, generates an interplay of completion and distension. Each episode offers a promise of the kind of finality and completeness which is lacking in actual life, a sensation heightened by the fact that the viewer knows that some inevitable alteration will occur in the next episode. In these senses, it is an error to separate out the Manichean moral element as if it were the one controlling level.

We have already seen how the *folletin* passed into the *radionovela* and later the *telenovela*. The most widely read material in the contemporary context is the *foltonovela* (photoromance) and the *historieta* (comic), sometimes published in editions of more than two million a week. Like the *folletin*, this material corresponds to situations of fragmented reading time and limited literacy. However, its immediate affiliation, in style of imagery, is not with radio or television but with cinema. Cornelia Butler Flora distinguishes three main types of *foltonovela*: the *rosa* (pink), whose themes are of the middle-, upper-middle-class or old-fashioned variety, which offers Cinderella-type plots; the *suave* (soft), whose theme is middle- and upper-middle-class life; and the *roja* (red), distinguished by its violent subject matter, such as rape or incest. Throughout, however, a particular outlook tends to predominate: 'the individualization of problems and their solution is the overwhelming message presented'.<sup>160</sup> The suggestion, in other words, is that the demands of integration into a modern capitalist economy are being articulated through plots which nevertheless allow the reader the expected ingredients of the genre.<sup>161</sup>

Comics are less affected by the transnational culture industry (for example, Disney) than might be expected. In Mexico, for instance, some 80 per cent of production is national. One particular variety is the *libros semanales* (comic-strip novels) and these raise the question of how women negotiate the transition between traditional and modern structures. Unglamorous in comparison with the older types of escapist romantic fiction (such as the Corín Tellado novels), they are 'clearly intended for women who are integrated or about to be integrated into the work place', as Jean Franco argues; they 'require a different kind of modernization plot, one that cannot simply hold out the carrot of consumption'.<sup>162</sup> The process of modernization requires a readjustment of attitudes to the family, that nexus of controls of the present by the past.

Mexican postrevolutionary policy had encouraged the secularization of public life while leaving the traditional patriarchal family untouched and absorbing machismo into its national image. The Mexican family is thus an extremely complex institution, not only a source of considerable tensions, especially among the poor, but a source of support and daily communication that the state and its institutions cannot replace.<sup>163</sup>

The stories in the *novelas semanales* include an invitation to women to distance themselves from the traditionally male-dominated family: 'women are invited to see themselves as victims of a plot, the plot of old Mexico that has passed on the tradition of machismo and thus harmed them. If, instead of reading themselves into the plot as helpless victims, they turn their resentment against the older generation of men and separate themselves from this influence, they can expect to succeed.'<sup>164</sup>

Here is a summary of the plot of *Una mujer insatisfecha* (*An Unsatisfied Woman*), an example dating from 1984:

the heroine is married to a boring and impotent businessman who believes in patriarchy and the traditional values of family life. Luisa is repelled by his puritanical attitude to marital relations and quarrels with her Italian mother-in-law, whose ideas on marriage are strictly traditional. She sets up her own consultancy as a designer and meets another man but refuses to enter into a relationship that promises to be as oppressive as the one with her husband. Back in her mother's home, she hangs up the telephone when her new lover calls, feeling 'free, happy and without ties'.<sup>165</sup>

Once again, as with the *telenovela*, the family emerges as a crucial mediator of reception. As far as we know, no one has yet written a comprehensive history of the family in Latin America.<sup>166</sup>

Another key effect of the modern urban environment is the disconnection of social classes and cultural strata. Increasingly, all social groups have at their disposal the same cultural repertory. As opposed to a minority being able to understand literature or art, now everyone is able to draw on a stock of recognitions which make up the ability to decode the media. Television series use an archive of allusions from film and television, and these are now part of a common culture in the same way that the great works of literature were previously.

The different repertoires become mixed in such a way that it is no longer possible to be educated [*culto*] by knowing the great artistic works or to be popular because of being able to understand the meaning of the objects and messages generated by a more or less closed community [ethnic group, *barrio*, class]. Nowadays these collections are unstable, they renew their composition and their hierarchy as fashions change, they intersect all the time, and above all every user can make their own collection.<sup>167</sup>

This situation, the so-called postmodern, is important for present purposes because it prevents one from equating the deterritorialization of cultural practices with their degradation, and from proffering nostalgic returns to a time when membership of a social elite could be equated with some guardianship of culture (or vice versa). The latter attitude is in fact more typical in Western Europe than in Latin America, where the utopianization of rural authenticity has more symbolic power. The increasing migration of rural cultures and their retransmission through new urban-based channels mean that popular cannot mean purity nor the culture industry its loss. A different definition of the popular becomes necessary, in terms of the possibility of a counter-hegemony.

### Alternative Media

Alternative media represent a deliberate attempt to give a counter-hegemonic force to mass communication practices, by exploring the use of media technology outside the control of the culture industry. Alternative media embrace audiotape, radio, television and video, film, and newspapers. We will refer only to radio, but the issues that emerge have a bearing on the whole range of media. Certain characteristics facilitate the use of radio as a medium for popular reappropriation: relatively low cost, wide outreach, and the accessibility of recording technology. Rosa María Alfaro's account of the