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Mass Culture as Domination or Resistance in Latin American Narratives

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MASS CULTURE AS DOMINATION OR RESISTANCE IN LATIN AMERICAN NARRATIVES

By

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Since the introduction of radio to Latin America in the 1930’s and later television in the 1950’s, mass culture has become an important and even contentious part of Latin American identity, and as such has also become an important part of Latin American narratives. In looking at the issue of mass culture, two basic approaches emerge: one can see mass culture as a force of domination or one can see it as a force of resistance. It is possible to trace these approaches through different time periods and geopolitical situations. The Mexican Onda writers, for instance, utilize the rock and roll of North American mass culture for the creation of a generational ethos which pushes the boundaries of the authoritarian idea of Mexican identity. This can be seen as a positive force, as is the case with José Agustín, Gustavo Sainz and Parménides García Saldaña, or as a manifestation of cultural imperialism as Hector Manjarrez proposes. Carlos Monsiváis bridges the spectrum between the two ideologies, gradually envisioning mass culture to be an instrument of cultural imperialism at the same time that it offers a means of resisting social hierarchies and assumptions. At the same time that the Onda authors are exploring Mexican identity, Manuel Puig incorporates mass culture through film and radio in his novels with a different focus. In his novels, Boquitas pintadas and The Buenos Aires Affair, Puig explores the construction of power structures based on gender and ultimately proposes that mass culture can be used to resist these structures if one
takes an active, critical approach. The Onda and Puig form a strong basis for comparison and contrast for postmodern writers Alberto Fuguet and Rodrigo Fresán. These authors see mass culture as a part of the fabric of postmodern life, but in this they also see it as a means of domination. Mass culture becomes a fetish that allows the individual to maintain the status quo.
For my wife, Jessica
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Chapter 1

Mass Culture and Theory:

From Adorno and Benjamin to Latin America

Probably the criteria most often agreed upon for distinguishing between the modern and postmodern cultural sensibilities is their respective attitudes toward mass culture. Modernism defined itself in opposition to mass culture. Postmodernism embraces its forms and contents, incorporating them within new artifacts that blur the distinction between high and low culture.

Santiago Colás (ix)

In 1996, Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez published their, to many, groundbreaking collection of short stories, *McOndo*, and instilled a new look within the academic as well as literary community as to what Latin American literature is and should be. The project of Fuguet and Gómez highlights the need of a new generation to find a voice and their increasing desire to distance themselves from the great Boom narratives that have become the expected norm from Latin American authors. In looking at this newer generation of authors that have recently enjoyed more critical attention, one encounters a narrative that seeks to forge through new territory and to become an autonomous form of art. As is always the case, individual regions and individual writers each have their own unique and separate styles, themes, motifs, etc., but in looking at a
group of writers who, either directly or tangentially, are connected with the McOndo project, Alberto Fuguet or Rodrigo Fresán for instance, the theme of mass culture and its relationship with their narrative creation and with other forms of culture becomes a clear area of interest. Based on the increased importance of mass culture within their work, we can examine the texts of these authors in the historical and literary context of their day, at the same time examining their precursors, writers who in the heyday of the Boom narratives chose to take a different approach, one that was less concerned with the great national narratives and more concerned with mass culture and its place in society and in literature. If we focus on the geographical, regional landscape, we find that the Onda writers in Mexico and Manuel Puig in the Southern Cone both provide examples of writers with whom the later McOndo authors enter into indirect dialogue. In looking at all of these writers and the theoretical background that coexists with their works, two very distinct attitudes towards mass culture emerge: a positive vision that sees mass culture as a means of resistance to traditional or authoritative practices and ideas about art, and a negative vision that sees mass culture as a force of domination or oppression.

**A Working Definition of Mass Culture.**

Before we begin to examine mass culture within these writers’ texts, it is necessary to have a clear grasp of what mass culture is and the controversies that surround it. The debate regarding mass culture and its relationship with so called “high” culture (e.g. Literature) is certainly not new. This debate finds resonance with the criticism of both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and many critics and authors in one way or another continue their arguments. This relationship becomes one of the primary focuses of postmodern thought and expression. Since the scope of this project
seeks to trace the interplay of mass culture in Latin American literature from the 1960’s to the present postmodern era, the suggestion that postmodernism effects a transition in the attitude that it takes towards mass culture is a very pertinent one. This in no way means that every text that incorporates mass culture is postmodern nor that every postmodern work will include mass culture. However, the combination of high and low cultures and the proposed change of attitude toward culture both signal a possible entry into the broader theme of mass culture. In looking at contemporary Latin American fiction, from the sixties to today, one of the themes increasingly gains attention in this narrative is precisely the inclusion and use of mass culture as a theme or as a literary technique.

Examining mass or popular culture in the Latin American context, one first runs into the problem of terminology. What is meant by mass culture or popular culture? Why use one term and not the other? How does mass / popular culture deviate from other types of cultures? As many theorists point out, the first step is to determine what one means by culture. Raymond Williams, in his seminal work *Keywords*, points out that culture can refer to three different concepts. The first usage refers generally to the process of aesthetic and intellectual development, i.e. culture taken as great intellectual and artistic milestones. This is the way that proponents of a clear separation between high and popular culture understand the term Culture. It includes only the artifacts and practices that are said to have literary or artistic value. The canonical Boom works of Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and others would certainly fall into this category. The second usage that Williams describes is a more ambiguous term that indicates the things that separate one group of people from another. In this sense, Latin
American culture might contain such stereotypical practices as the quinceañera or Day of the Dead celebrations. The third way that the term is used highlights intellectual and artistic practices. Williams confesses that, “[t]his seems to be the most widespread use: culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film” (90). In looking at popular or mass culture, then, the third definition is most useful. Mass culture with this later focus becomes the artifacts, film, radio, and even print, that are consumed by or produced for the masses. According to some, however, one should maintain a separation between this third definition, culture as artistic practice, and the first, culture as intellectual milestone.

In addition to Williams’s definitions of culture, Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital is pertinent to this discussion. Bourdieu states that cultural artifacts, whether they pertain to high culture or mass culture, possess an arbitrary yet very real symbolic weight. In order to approach this concept, he makes a distinction between economic and symbolic capital. There is certainly a connection between the two concepts. Symbolic capital functions in largely the same way as economic capital, in that it serves as a form of exchange and has an inherent yet arbitrary value. The major difference is that, while this process is very apparent with economic capital, symbolic capital works through veiling and obfuscation of the values and exchanges involved. This means that not all objects are symbolically equal; the work of classical literature or music, for example, has more symbolic substance than the work of popular literature or music, even if their economic value is the same. Thus, cultural artifacts and practices serve as “cultural capital” for the benefit of those who can manipulate them, allowing once again for the cultural stratification of society. In this way, the ability to interpret a work of “high” art
correctly is a form of cultural capital and the consumer who possesses it is in a position to benefit from elevated social standing due to this fact.\textsuperscript{4}

Having temporarily defined “high” culture as “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Williams 90) which contain a certain amount of cultural capital, the next problem comes from trying to understand what is meant by mass or popular culture as opposed to other cultures (and indeed the semantic differences between these two ideas). In some cases, mass or popular culture is taken to be that which is not considered high culture. This exclusionary definition, however, makes the topic too simple. If mass culture is that which is not high culture, how can one account for the popularity of texts like Shakespeare, or in the case of Latin American literature Gabriel García Márquez? Texts by these authors are clearly part of Williams’ first definition of culture as benchmarks of literary development and production and contain a high degree of cultural capital. At the same time, these texts appeal to the people in the form of actual representations, but more still with an increasingly wide range of cinematic and other mass media versions.

Another potential approach to the idea of mass culture could be to designate it as culture that is generally liked by the masses, but as John Storey notes, “[u]nless we can agree on a figure over which something becomes popular culture, and below which it is just culture, we might find that widely favoured or well liked by many people included so much as to be virtually useless as a conceptual definition of popular culture” (7). As observed with Shakespeare or García Márquez, traditional conceptions of high and low culture based on popularity problematize a definition of mass culture as opposed to an elevated concept of culture. If we attempt to classify a text as mass culture based on
empirical methods, finding a magical sales number or position on the bestseller charts above which a text or artifact is considered popular, the idea of popular culture once again gets bogged down in simplification and absurdist arguments. If such a magic figure exists, the popularity argument begs the question about how to consider the text or work that lies immediately under this level. Would such a text be pseudo-popular or is it “doomed” to a space of insignificance?

Given the problems of defining mass or popular culture, perhaps it is best to first look at what is meant by the mass or popular part of the term. The term popular can also be somewhat problematic. Pierre Bourdieu sees popular as that which is opposed by the bourgeois class. Popular language, and with it popular culture, is that which is excluded from the spheres of legitimacy and power. He states that,

As the dictionaries of slang and “unconventional language” clearly show, what is called “popular” or “colloquial” vocabulary is nothing other than the set of words which are excluded from dictionaries of the legitimate language or which only appear in them with negative “labels of use”: . . . pop., popular, “i.e. common in urban working-class areas, but disapproved of or avoided by the cultivated bourgeoisie as a whole.” (Language 90)

So the term popular, as will also happen with the term masses, a priori sets up a distinction between the proposed audiences. The consumers of popular culture are certainly not those who are capable of enjoying “higher” forms of culture such as museums, canonized art and literature, or opera and theater. Bourdieu notes another problem with the term popular as he expresses that this implicit audience is even more exclusionary than just social class. Without a doubt, the audience of popular culture is
conceived of as the lower and middle classes, especially those with limited education. What Bourdieu points out is that this audience of necessity excludes the underworld while peasants, a group not necessary included completely in the idea of popular, would of necessity form a part of the implicit audience (Language 91).

The idea of popular, however, as that which is not “high” culture is so varied in its nuances that it in many ways becomes a largely meaningless term. Popular culture refers to such varied cultural artifacts as folklore, popular art (i.e. graffiti, etc.), tabloids, and rural festivals. The corpus of “popular culture,” then, is so vast that an attempt to study it falls into problems of scope. Where do we start and where do we limit it? Combined with the potential extent nature of “popular culture” is the lack of a consensus as to what is popular culture. As mentioned above, popular culture can be a variety of different forms of cultural production, but it is not necessarily the same thing to everyone. As a case in point, David Williams Foster defines popular culture as “lo que vivimos cotidianamente, nuestra habla fática, los diarios, los cines, la televisión y todos aquellos ritos y rituales sociales que configuran el común denominador cultural de un pueblo. Estos fenómenos pueden tener un lejano origen folclórico . . .” (17). In his rather broad definition, Foster draws the line at including folklore as popular culture, although he does acknowledge a certain relationship. Jean Franco points out that the idea of popular culture becomes “organized under a series of programmatic rubric” (10), but it may become too systematized and in many cases subordinated to “true culture.” Such is the case with Foster’s definition, and indeed many others: it becomes at the same time too broad and too schematized to be really useful. Due to these problems, the term mass
culture, although certainly not without its own problems, seems to be a more effective one.

If we use the term mass culture, it becomes necessary to decide what is meant by the term masses. As occurs with the term culture, the idea of the masses or the people present in the concept of “mass culture” has a multiplicity of definitions, each with their own ideological implications. To speak of the masses brings a range of different connotations, from the teeming masses that come with urbanization to the masses as a threat to order and peace. Jesús Martín Barbero traces the idea of the masses back to the time period following the French Revolution. He notes that, “[t]he concept was born out of fear of the mob and, although it evolved into a more sophisticated social pessimism, the idea never lost its sense of disgust for the violent mob” (23). Although the term’s meaning was modified over time, it maintained its negative appeal throughout the 19th century as a threat to civilization. Thinkers like De Tocqueville were instrumental in changing the concept of the masses from representing outsiders to becoming a part of society.⁵

The concept of the masses changed radically towards the end of the 19th century with the appearance of both psychology (through Freud) and Marxism. Freud’s most important contribution comes from his work on group psychology. As Martín Barbero states, for Freud, “[t]he masses are force without control. Is that control not the task of science? The psychologist sets up the study of the susceptibility of the masses to suggestion in order to control them” (27).⁶ If the masses are a force without control that simply needs guiding, then the implication for the culture industry and culture is that it is their task and not that of science to guide the masses. In other words, Freud’s work on
group psychology gives added weight to the later Frankfurt School criticism of mass culture as mass deception. It is also doubly important to note that with the advent of the idea of a collective psychology, the focus on the masses changes from one of fear of the mob (resistance by the mob) to one that acknowledges the possibility of dominance over the mob (domination).

In all fairness, the idea of the masses as a threat or as a group ripe for domination is not the only conception of the masses. Critics like Walter Benjamin, Herbert Shiller, Daniel Bell, Edward Shils and others see the idea of the masses and mass culture in a more positive light. According to Shils, the inception of mass society is one that allows for the inclusion of the majority into the social fabric. Martín Barbero comments on the ideas of Shils and others, saying that, “[m]ass no longer means anonymous, passive conformity. Mass culture is the first to allow communication between the different levels of society” (35). Thus, mass culture is a positive force due to its ability to allow individuality within a societal context. Mass culture exhibits the possibility of communication and exchange between social classes rather than a strict system of domination and dominated.

The masses refers to a heterogeneous group of people that is homogenized for the sake of simplicity. When we refer to the masses, the heterogeneity of the group is subsumed in the simplicity of the idea. The masses are always a collective, frequently considered one of an inferior social and economic status. Another crucial part of the idea of the masses, and subsequently of mass culture, is that the masses exist as an industrialized and urban group. The urban masses, then, are considered the consumers of the mass produced cultural artifacts of industrialization and technological advances.
It is precisely these artifacts that I intend to examine in the theory and literature of Latin America. The idea of the masses, and of mass culture also presupposes the inferiority of these artifacts. Jean Franco states, “mass culture generally implies a distaste on the part of the user toward the product” and that “[m]ass culture preconditions the responses of its audience and educates them as consumers rather than as active participants” (6). While mass culture certainly can have a negative connotation, this idea is not the universal.

Perhaps a better way to look at the idea of mass culture is not that of aesthetic worth as opposed to “high” culture, but rather in terms of its implications for the social classes. In looking at the idea of the masses and culture, it is useful to return to the idea of “cultural capital” as expressed by Pierre Bourdieu. The French sociologist above all talks about the separation of consumption through social and educational class. That is, a consumer’s education and social status has a great deal of influence on their aesthetic taste. Thus taste becomes less of an inherent trait and more a manifestation of the status of the consumer. What Bourdieu found in his investigations was a hierarchization of cultural goods, with some products, those associated with high culture, preferred by the educated upper classes and mass culture preferred by members of the less educated lower classes.

In many ways, this contrast presumes a conflict between the educated / initiated and the uninitiated. If aesthetic taste is a learned trait, one has to acquire the skills necessary to view the work of “high” art, whereas “low” or mass culture can be consumed by the uninitiated. Bourdieu credits this to the complexity of formal experimentation and refinement. He claims that, “[f]ormal refinement – which, in
literature or the theatre, leads to obscurity - is, in the eyes of the working-class public, one sign of what is sometimes felt to be a desire to keep the uninitiated at arm’s length” (Distinction 33). One of the ways that “high” art does this is in the “aura” of distance and unattainability that emanates from the work. In contrast, popular culture seeks to include the spectator in the aesthetic experience. The mass production of art effectively destroys its “aura” because the possibility of reproducing it eliminates the prestige involved in the idea of the original, something which Walter Benjamin explores in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility.” Mass culture destroys the elite vision of “high” art, opening it up to all and making it approachable. In this case, “high” art intentionally seeks to limit its audience to the educated, generally higher social classes.

The act of distinguishing between high and low culture is also seen by Bourdieu as one of negation. Bourdieu defines taste as “the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes” (Distinction 56). This is not to say that taste is a simple exclusionary practice: I like X because it is not Y or Z. Rather any act of recognizing taste, of necessity, presumes positive and negative categories. It is more a process of: I like X because it does not have Y or Z, but does have A and B. As with the whole process of taste, social class and education come into play in the idea of difference and negation. Bourdieu proposes that, “for the working classes, their sole function in the system of aesthetic positions is to serve as a foil, a negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves by successive negations” (Distinction 57). In the traditional concept of high and mass culture, the later serves as the negation of the former. True culture is that which does not have mass appeal with the working classes;
the lower classes only consume mass culture, which can never aspire to rise above its marginal status. It is important to note that the aristocracy of taste is imposed not just from above, with the cultural elites prohibiting the lower cultural and social classes from consuming “high” culture, but also is manifested from below. Those who consume mass culture have similar prejudices against “high” culture that the cultural “elites” hold for mass culture.

Following Bourdieu, Néstor García Canclini suggests that one of the purposes (or at least effects) of mass culture is that of distinguishing between social classes. He states that, “el consumo se vuelve un área fundamental para instaurar y comunicar las diferencias. Ante la relativa democratización producida al masificarse el acceso a los productos, la burguesía necesita ámbitos separados de las urgencias de la vida práctica, donde los objetos se ordenan –como en los museos– por sus afinidades estilísticas y no por su utilidad” (Culturas híbridas 36). In other words, those of the lower classes consume only mass cultural products to satisfy their desire to be entertained, while the upper classes are more likely to consume high culture, that is, products consumed by a small social group, and in doing so they are supposedly looking for a cultural experience that goes beyond mere entertainment. It is this hierarchization of cultural products that helps to maintain a cultural separation between social classes.11 As such, the concept of mass culture also serves in this sense as another barrier between high culture, and the social class that consumes it, and the lower classes, despite the seeming democratic function of mass culture. Regarding this idea, García Canclini adds that, “[l]o culto pasó a ser un área cultivada por fracciones de la burguesía y de los sectores medios, mientras la mayor parte de las clases altas y medias, y la casi totalidad de las clases populares, iba
siendo adscrita a la programación masiva de la industria cultural” (Culturas híbridas 85).

While mass culture can touch on almost all aspects of the social spectrum, high culture is reserved for the intellectual and economic elites.\(^\text{12}\)

The theories discussed to this point can provide us with a working definition of mass culture; we can understand mass culture as the collection of cultural products that can be attributed to the technological advances which allow for mass communication (i.e., radio, television, the internet, etc.) and that exists in opposition to a more elitist vision of high culture. Mass culture is intended for a diverse and in many cases amorphous audience, the masses. The products of mass culture can be seen as instruments of social control for the masses, as we will see in the ideas of Horkheimer and Adorno, but they can also have very positive connotations.

**Two Paradigms: Mass Culture as Domination or Mass Culture as Resistance.**

In looking at the interplay of mass culture and high culture, two distinct attitudes appear: mass culture as domination and mass culture as resistance. The first of these ideologies could be traced back to the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century and thinkers who, like Sarmiento in the case of Latin America, saw a clear and obvious distinction between the “civilization” of the elite educated cities and the “barbaric” masses. John Storey calls this ideology the “Culture and Civilization” tradition that finds its expression in English literary history with the ideas of Matthew Arnold who, writing in the 1860s, defined culture as “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold in Storey 23). Like Arnold, Sarmiento compared mass culture to anarchy while Culture has the capacity to tame the wild masses. This idea certainly re-emerges in a more sophisticated form in
the 20th Century with the Marxist approach of some of the members of the Frankfurt School.

The group of researchers known as the Frankfurt School, which includes Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and others, is certainly not a completely homogenous entity. However, the ideas that these intellectuals theorize about mass culture later became very influential for Latin American thinkers. The theories of the Frankfurt School serve as a point of departure for the discussion of mass culture in Latin America, and one can trace its presence throughout the dialogue about mass culture. In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno set forth a vision of mass culture as an instrument of social restraint and control. In their chapter, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Horkheimer and Adorno start with the premise that mass culture takes culture from the sphere of art to the sphere of business. The business of mass culture, which they call the culture industry, creates a form of art that is the antithesis of aesthetic art. The products of the culture industry, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, are both democratic and formulaic.

Taking the first of these concepts, that mass culture is democratic, one sees in the work of these two Frankfurt School theorists the negativity of the democratization of art. They considered it a false democratization, a process found in the intertwined connection and separation that mass culture seeks from its audience. The consumer of film is expected to view the fabulous stories that filter through the silver screen with a sense of belonging and estrangement. He or she can envision for themselves the perfect Hollywood ending that the movie character attains, yet recognizes the statistical improbability of achieving this same fairy tale life. In fact, “the deceived masses are
captivated by the myth of success more than the successful are” (133-34). The culture industry acts as a pressure valve, allowing pent up energy to be released by portraying the underdog attaining the same status as the privileged, implying that the consumer has a chance at the life portrayed in the cultural product.

Combined with its simultaneous effect of inclusion and exclusion, mass culture also democratizes the cultural experience at the same time that it eliminates individuality; that is, mass culture seeks to cultivate a uniform, homogenous audience in order to better exert social control. As Horkheimer and Adorno state, “[i]ndustry is interested in people merely as customers and employees, and has in fact reduced mankind as a whole and each of its elements to this all-embracing formula” (147). The culture industry makes the audience conform to its conception of what the audience should be. In fact, the culture industry becomes one of a number of ways to ensure the docility of the masses.

According to Arnold and Sarmiento, culture serves as a civilizing force upon the barbaric masses. Horkheimer and Adorno state that, “[c]ulture has always played its part in taming revolutionary and barbaric instincts. Industrial culture adds its contribution. It shows the condition under which this merciless life can be lived at all” (152). In other words, mass culture allows the consumer to take a completely passive stance, because it offers conclusions with no need for independent thought. There is no need to think, if the culture industry can explain the conclusions that the individual should make.

Horkheimer and Adorno go one step further by saying that, “. . . industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him” (124).
Horkheimer and Adorno adamantly state that, “[f]ilms, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system” (120). The culture industry transforms every facet of life into simple, easily followed formulas. It does this to such an extent that individual differences tend to disappear. Political opposites become hard to distinguish through the filter of mass culture. All of this occurs as a consequence of the change of mass culture from art to business, folk culture to culture industry. The culture industry does not promote art but entertainment. The importance of style and aesthetics is lost. What does it matter if a product of the culture industry maintains high aesthetic standards if its very function is that of social control and deception, if its purpose is to simply pass two hours in isolation and escape? Aesthetics requires thought, while the culture industry shuns thought. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it, “the style of the culture industry is the negation of style” (129) and “[t]he development of the culture industry has led to the predominance of the effect, the obvious touch, and the technical detail over the work itself – which once expressed an idea, but was liquidated together with the idea” (125). The culture industry has consciously thrown out the proverbial baby of artistry with the bathwater of cheap innovation. For the culture industry it is not good for the public to think too much.

If social control is the primary function of the culture industry and entertainment is its principal medium, mass culture eliminates the barriers between work and consumption: “[a]musement under late capitalism is the continuation of work” (Horkheimer and Adorno 137). Life and film become one, so that the worker, when he leaves work, sees only a representation of this work in the culture industry to which he
looks for escape. The elimination of the boundary between mass culture and daily life underscores the uniformity of the culture industry itself and its vision of the world. This lack of originality permeates the very fabric of its makeup, and intensifies its controlling element. Horkheimer and Adorno insist that “[t]he culture industry does not sublimate: it represses” (140).

Through the formulas and the pseudo-democratization of the culture industry, the masses effectively lose their voice and their advocacy. The Frankfurt School’s pessimistic vision of the culture industry leaves no space for aesthetic innovation or social action, but they believe it leads to stagnation and the enslavement of the masses, subsumed to the will and needs of the nebulous powers behind the culture industry. For Horkheimer and Adorno, there is a clear separation between Culture and the culture industry. Culture is a positive element that facilitates the intellectual, aesthetic and potentially economic emancipation of the masses while the culture industry works to maintain the status quo, offering a space in which thought is not permitted and in which culture and the very concept of the masses becomes a homogenous clay which the powers of the culture industry can manipulate at will. Mass culture for Horkheimer and Adorno is, above all, domination.

While many critics include Walter Benjamin in the Frankfurt School, his ideas differ markedly from those of Adorno and Horkheimer. In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction,” Benjamin responds to the arguments that mass culture serves as social control. This does not mean that there is absolutely no agreement among the theorists. Benjamin sees a clear separation between high and low culture, and recognizes the possibility of a negative effect from mass culture. In fact,
Benjamin, in speaking about film, states that “[i]ts social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (223). The new technologies which allow mechanical reproduction of art certainly damage certain aspects of what has traditionally been seen as Culture according to Benjamin. From this, Benjamin develops his theory of the loss of “aura” through mechanical reproduction. The aura, for Benjamin, is the element of the work that has a direct and lasting impression upon the spectator. The aura of a work of art separates it from other forms of production, and the aura is connected to the authenticity of a work of art. Due to its very nature, mass culture occupies a space separated from authenticity, since, “[t]he whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility” (222). It makes no sense to talk of the authentic or original work when one starts to examine the products of these technological innovations, like photography, film, or radio. In fact, technology allows art to escape the need for authenticity.

Benjamin sees this as a somewhat positive development. He explains that art began as a form of ritual and cult. From the very beginning, Art was the visual manifestation of religious or magical phenomenon and played a role in maintaining its cult status. With the decay of the aura comes the separation of art from its cult side. As Benjamin puts it, “for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (226). It is in the idea of the positive separation of art from cult or ritual that Benjamin deviates from the Frankfurt School ideology of Horkheimer and Adorno. The destruction of the aura and its liberation from its ritualistic function allows art to pursue a more democratic and
active role in the lives of the masses; it works as a force of resistance against the elitism of high art.

Benjamin agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno that mass culture is democratic, but rather than a controlled democratic manifestation in which mass culture is only democratic to the extent that it is available to a homogenous audience (the domination argument), Benjamin sees mass culture as creating more engaged, active participants. As Néstor García Canclini would later state, “consumption is good for thinking” (Consumers 37). Another Latin American theorist points that according to Benjamin, the death of the aura

is not so much about art as about a new perception which breaks the wrapping, the halo and the shining brilliance thereby placing the common man, the masses in a position to use and enjoy art. [. . .] Now the masses, with the help of technology, feel nearer to even the most remote and sacred things. Their perception carries a demand for equality that is the basic energy of the masses. (Martín-Barbero 48)

What separates Benjamin from the other Frankfurt theorists is his perception regarding the value of art and, more specifically, mass culture. Benjamin states that “by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental” (227). In other words, art has changed its very function to one of exhibition, and this change can be expected to bring about other changes as well, mainly in the perception of what constitutes aesthetic value and artistic importance. In signaling art’s new value or function, which includes its separation from a previous ritualistic function, Benjamin underscores out the positive aspects of this
change, but does not necessarily view it as a completely positive phenomenon. As Jesús Martín-Barbero mentions, Benjamin’s position is not necessarily one of unmitigated admiration for the technological advances that support this culture industry, but rather Benjamin’s theorization of mass culture focuses on “the role of technology in abolishing separations and privileges” (49).

Part of this elimination of barriers that comes with the decay of the aura is the idea that the masses become active participants with mass culture. Due to the loss of aura, the public consciously occupies the privileged status of critic. Instead of maintaining the distance necessary for the ritualistic consumption of culture, the consumer of mass culture feels free to interpret the work that they are consuming. This is in part due to “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (Benjamin 225). The masses, as a group, seek to get closer to the objects with which they interact, both in terms of “high” art as well as the more popular forms of culture, like mass culture. This, combined with the recognition of the artificiality of the culture industry, allows the masses for the first time to look at Art from an objective point of view and to read into Art that which was inaccessible under the banner of ritual.

In addition to this, the very possibility of reproducibility gives the masses the ability to exercise their position as critic in a very public way. As Benjamin states, “[w]ith the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers – at first occasional ones” (234). The masses see in these forums
for expression the means to publicly express their ability to interact critically. For the first time, the masses are given access to a public critical dialogue about a wide range of topics, from the political to the artistic. With the advent of the press, the masses can now focus on publishing their opinions, in the form of letters to the editor, etc. This gives them a place that is equal to that of any other in keeping with the democratic bent of mass culture. Benjamin, above all, sees mass culture as having the possibility of resistance to the aristocracy of culture that Bordieu describes.

**Mass Culture in Latin America: From National Populism to the Retreat of the State.**

The idea of mass culture as being either a democratizing force of resistance or a dominating, pacifying element has a special resonance with Latin American intellectuals, especially given the physical proximity and economic relationship that these countries share with the United States. In order to effectively examine the dilemma of the culture industry and Latin America from the 1960s to the 21st Century, it is useful to differentiate two periods. Until the relatively recent trends of neoliberalism and globalization, many Latin American political leaders promoted national populism. Before looking at the notion of national populism, it is important to note that many Latin American nations, in conjunction with their goals of modernization, were experiencing a rapid urbanization throughout the 20th Century, but especially in the 1960s. The population shift from the country to the city allowed for the creation of the urban masses. To take just one instance, Mexico City had around one and a half million inhabitants in 1940. This number climbed to five million in 1960. The significance of this urbanization lies in the emphasis that both national and political populism and the culture industry place on the
urban sector. The city and the urban masses are important participants in the structure and nature of influence that the culture industry and populism seek to achieve.

Gareth Williams, in *The Other Side of the Popular*, argues that a correlation to the (uneven) processes of modernization in Latin America was an effort to establish a unifying national identity in each country/Latin American nation. This process in many ways took the form of an appeal to the masses of varying types. As Williams states, “[p]opular integration was deemed to be fundamental for the consolidation of state hegemony, for the formation of disciplined national industrial labor forces, for capitalist / socialist development, for the successful nationalization of society, and ultimately, for the end to Latin America’s socioeconomic and cultural backwardness” (5). The process of popular integration which Williams describes began in the 1940s but continued through the 1960s and 1970s in many countries. In order to promote a national popular ideology, many Latin American countries turned towards protectionist policies regarding their own cultural production in terms of mass culture as well as the propagation and support of “higher” cultural forms that promoted a national transcultural perspective. In these efforts to promote a “national” culture, the means of mass communication served as a homogenizing force for the transmission of national identity. García Canclini notes that, “[l]a radio ‘nacionalizó’ el idioma; la televisión unifica las entonaciones, da repertorios de imágenes donde lo nacional sintoniza con lo internacional” (*Culturas híbridas* 244). The mass media played an important role in the process of nation building, to a greater or lesser extent in all Latin American nations simply as an area of common cultural background. In the perspective of national populism, the music played on the radio, or the radionovelas helped impart a common sense of national spirit to its citizens. García
Canclini recognizes the connection that mass culture has with older popular traditions when he comments that, “[l]a radio en todos los países latinoamericanos, y en algunos el cine, ponen en escena el lenguaje y los mitemas del pueblo que casi nunca recogían la pintura, la narrativa, ni la música dominantes” (Culturas híbridas 241). The “people” (as a political concept) could see themselves in the national character that was echoed in the various forms of mass culture.

With national populism came the economic policy of import substitution industrialization, that is, the idea that nations should substitute imported goods for domestically produced goods to the degree possible. García Canclini discusses this policy in relation to the realm of cultural production. He states that

De los años cuarenta a los setenta del siglo XX la creación de editoriales en Argentina, Brasil, México, Colombia, Chile, Perú, Uruguay y Venezuela produjo una “substitución de importaciones” en el campo de la cultura letrada, tan significativo para la configuración de naciones democráticas modernas.[. . .] (Culturas híbridas XVII)  

The national autonomy of the print industry also coincides with a growing level of education and an increased literacy rate. While there are certainly examples earlier in the 20th Century of the artist who lives by his art, or at least works in related fields like the Latin American Modernista writers, this phenomenon gains ground at the moment when literacy and education rates are also rising. As the base of the literate public increases, the ability of the artist to dedicate him or herself to art becomes more of a viable possibility and the independent professional author, like Carlos Fuentes, is not such a rarity. Part of this professionalization also resulted in a growing divide between
what is considered culture (“lo culto”) and what is considered popular or mass culture.
The new brand of professional writers immerse themselves in aesthetic innovation and complex narrative. According to García Canclini, “[a]l ensimismarse el arte culto en búsquedas formales, se produce una separación más brusca entre los gustos de las élites y los de las clases populares y medias controlados por la industria cultural” (Culturas híbridas 83). This separation serves to deepen the divide between the concepts of culture and the culture industry.

Starting roughly in the 1940s, the culture industry in Latin America is also burgeoning, most notably in the stronger economic nations of Mexico and Argentina. The importance of national or regional radio in all Latin American countries cannot be underestimated, especially given the difficulties inherent in importing radio media from abroad. However, the film industry offers a more striking example of the relative power of Latin American cultural production in the 1940s and 50s. Mexican film production is said to have a “golden age” in the period from around 1940 to 1954. Mexican film enjoyed wide distribution and popularity throughout Latin America; in fact, it is a time of celebrated film directors, like Luis Buñuel and Emilio Fernández as well as actors like Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, María Félix and Dolores del Río, who enjoy equal celebrity status with their Hollywood counterparts (García Canclini, Consumers 110). Despite its more regional appeal, Mexican film was still very much engaged in the processes of national identity creation. Jesús Martín Barbero notes three stages of Mexican film production. The first, which occurs between 1920 and 1940, seeks to capitalize upon the national / popular myths. In this stage, films idolizing the Revolution and romantic figures such as Pancho Villa are commonplace. The next stage, which begins in the
1930’s, is characterized by the masculine *ranchero*. The final stage that Martín Barbero notes is the diversification of subject matter that begins in the 1940s. He comments on the increasingly urban character of film, which also parallels the urbanization that is changing the national social makeup. According to Martín-Barbero, “[w]e find now the urban comedy in which the neighborhood replaced the countryside as the place where the old values found refuge and where the personal relations cut off by the city could be re-created” (168). The focus of Mexican film, therefore, changed to account for the changing national character and national identity.

If film occupies the place of prestige in the culture industry in Mexico, then the serial novel or weekly periodical and then radio and the radionovela does so in Argentina. Although the separation between “serious” writing and the radionovela is a lasting and strict one in Argentina, the radio serves to bring popular narrative art to the masses. This separation is an important aspect of any study of mass culture. Beatriz Sarlo examines the serial novel and connects its success directly to an increase in literacy rate that is the result of modernization (*Modernidad* 18). At the same time, Sarlo recognizes the context in which the serial novel develops, a context which shares much with other products of the culture industry (*Imperio* 28). The serial novel, and later the radionovela, give the masses a cultural outlet that the intellectual writers deny them. In many ways, the serial novel and radionovela have the same audience and complement each other in terms of both theme and technique. Sarlo examines the intersection of other mass culture forms and the serial novel, stating that certain topic serve as a “[f]oco de identificación para las lectoras jóvenes . . . [y] es compartido por la literatura sentimental y por el cine, recorriendo la narrativa seminal como uno de sus hilos conductores” (*Imperio* 25). The
two mediums even coexist for a time, the serial novel dating to the 19th Century. Radio takes over from the serial novel starting in the 1920s; in Argentina, radio receivers jumped from 1,000 in 1922 to one and a half million in 1936 (Martín-Barbero 168). Radio stations began transmitting drama in 1931. The radio takes popular and mass culture and fuses them. Whatever form it takes, the serial novel or the radionovela, these products are a way of bringing popular or folk culture to the masses.

Especially in the first half of the 20th century, mass culture forms an integral part of the process of national identification in Latin America. However, the culture industry does not maintain its function as an agent of national unification because of a shift in its focus. As will be discussed later, the culture industry changes its focus in the 1960s to become more vested in issues of progress and development than national identity. García Canclini acknowledges the decline in the ability of Mexican film to compete, due to “the reduction of state support; the closing off of the Cuban market with the revolution and the contraction of South American markets due to economic difficulties” (Consumers 112), as well as the emergence of television as a major player in the culture industry and the renewed interest of Hollywood towards foreign markets in the post Second World War era. In summary, the initial prestige of the Latin American culture industry, most notably Mexican film, experiences a sharp decline in the second half of the 20th century due to an increase in North American pressure and a decrease in governmental concern.

By connecting the culture industry to the signs of burgeoning modernization that intellectuals began to notice towards the second half of the twentieth century, García Canclini contributes to the depth of the discussion mass culture in Latin America. García Canclini identifies five areas in which these intellectuals track modernization: a more
diversified economy that is based on technological advances and industrialization, urban expansion and growth, a growing literacy rate, the variety and number of cultural products available, and the importance of radical political movements that favor modernization as a way to bring about social change and equality. The most significant of the factors that García Canclini mentions, however, is “la introducción de nuevas tecnologías comunicacionales, especialmente la televisión, que contribuyen a la masificación e internalización de las relaciones culturales y apoyan la vertiginosa venta de los productos ‘modernos’, ahora fabricados en América Latina” (Cultura híbridas 82).

It is the development and dissemination of communication technologies, radio and especially television, which promotes mass culture. Television fundamentally changes the landscape of Latin America in that it provides a more accessible forum for the culture of the masses and allows for the more absolute separation of culture from the culture industry. It is also through these mediums that Latin America opens its doors to cultural products from abroad, most notably the United States.

**Cultural Imperialism and Mass Culture.**

One of the aspects that distinguishes the Latin American situation from that which other critics of mass culture find, for example Benjamin and Adorno in Europe, is precisely the nature of Latin American modernization. The peripheral modernization of Latin America in relation to the great cultural centers of Paris, New York and London makes the cultural imperialist argument more important in light of its ability to evaluate the way the culture industry works in these societies.¹⁸ Rather than writing from the center of the culture industry, Latin American critics have the added factor that the mass cultural products they are consuming largely come from outside their national
boundaries, thus creating an additional level of domination, that of one culture over another.

Cultural imperialism is essentially a form of the mass culture as domination argument, but it merely deals with national and global boundaries rather than focusing on social class. The point of departure for this argument is the interpretation of imperialism as an economic concept rather than a purely political one. As John Tomlinson notes, in some cases, “the arguments become shaped by the presumption that the cultural goods on offer from the Capitalist west are almost a set of trinkets offered the third world in exchange for their labour power” (25). Tomlinson notes the special interest in this interpretation for some Latin American theorists. Borrowing heavily from Adorno, Tomlinson argues that foreign mass cultural products, that is, mass culture from outside the national boundaries, seeks to impose and to disseminate pro-Capitalist, pro-Western, and even pro-American ideologies to the detriment of the autonomy of the masses. Once again, mass culture serves to indoctrinate the masses, leaving them more passive to the exploitation of the powers that generate mass cultural products. In this sense, American mass culture can be seen as a threat to the nationalizing and populist tendencies of Latin American nations which are seeking to create a unique national identity and achieve autonomy.

Tomlinson explains how cultural imperialism can be equated with media imperialism. This idea assumes that foreign cultural products can infiltrate the national discourse through the mass media. The mass media become the instrument for domination, and the omnipresence of Western media brings about a de facto imperial presence that pushes national and regional cultural products out of the market. The idea
of cultural imperialism is also related to nationalist discourse that prefers local sustainable cultural production over imported culture. The cultural imperialism argument in many cases places cultural imperialism in the service of capitalism; it is “a set of practices enabling the spread of capitalism as an economic system” (Tomlinson 102). Thus, the media and other forms of cultural production work within the capitalist system as a force for self propagation.

Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart’s How to Read Donald Duck (1971) provides a prime example of the cultural imperialist argument. Dorfman and Mattelart seek to show the overt imperialist content of the popular Donald Duck cartoons. Tomlinson explains that “what Dorfman and Mattelart offer is an ‘oppositional reading’ of Disney, which penetrates this veneer of innocence to reveal the ideological assumptions that inform the stories and that can, arguably, naturalize and normalize the social relations of Western capitalism” (41). For example, they argue, rather fiercely, that the presentation of rich Uncle Scrooge also works to make the capitalist ideology softer, coming from a rich eccentric.

Dorfman and Mattelart seek to dispute the idea that the Disney comics, due to a benign medium (that of children’s literature) with seemingly innocent characters, and that they pose no cultural threat. They see the Disney comics constructing a system of dominators and dominated, in which the disenfranchised masses in the underdeveloped world are subject to the power of Western capitalist elites. In fact, Disney texts, for these authors, function as an instrument of domination. According to Dorfman and Mattelart, “[t]he benevolent collaboration figuring in the Disney comics suggests a form of neocolonialism which rejects the naked pillage of the past and permits the native a
minimal participation in his own exploitation” (54). This domination comes in the form of benevolent help and mutual aid. The dominators (Western capitalism) are kind and essentially good masters who seek to impart their superior wisdom to the backwards dominated masses.

This is possible through the objectification of the dominated. According to Dorfman and Mattelart, the Disney comics construct a series of binary oppositions: metropolis and periphery, cultured and uncultured, dominators and dominated. This system portrays the other, those who live outside the metropolis of Duckburg, as innocent, naïve natives who need the guiding hand of the educated. As such, these natives have no space from which to criticize the hegemonic city due to their lack of capacity for understanding (not only do they lack knowledge, but also the ability to gain knowledge). Dorfman and Mattelart affirm that, “[a]ccording to Disney, underdeveloped peoples are like children, to be treated as such, and if they don’t accept this definition of themselves, they should have their pants taken down and be given a good spanking” (48). It is important to note that in many cases (as happens with Aztecland, Inca-Blinca or Unsteadystan), the places and people that appear in the Disney comics are clearly identifiable with people and places throughout the underdeveloped world. Indeed, Disney appropriates a rigid world system and “[e]ach foreign country is used as a kind of model within the process of invasion by Disney-nature” (48). In portraying the underdeveloped world as the good savage, Disney also negates the possibility of criticism. As Dorfman and Mattelart argue, “[t]he child-savages have no chance to criticize, and thus replace the monolithic bloc of strangers from the city. The former can only accept the generosity of the latter and give them the wealth of their lands” (47).
The question remains, however, can Disney comics still pose a cultural imperialist threat given their popularity and market success? If Disney so systematically professes the Western capitalist ideal of subjugation for the underdeveloped, why do Latin Americans in particular continue to consume it? Dorfman and Mattelart state that:

The primary reason is that his [the Latin American’s] products, necesitated and facilitated by a huge industrial capitalist empire are imported together with so many other consumer objects into the dependent country, which is dependent precisely because it depends on commodities arising economically and intellectually at the power center’s totally alien (foreign) conditions. Our countries are exporters of raw materials, and importers of superstructural and cultural goods. (96)

From the time of Spanish colonization onward, Latin America was a source of raw materials and not a producer of manufactured goods, so the Disney message seems to make sense to many. Disney becomes only one of a number of imported goods, like Coca-Cola, that form part of the national economic system. Because Latin American nations produce primarily raw materials, under this theory it does not make sense for them to produce their own cultural goods, so rejecting the imported cultural goods is illogical. Dorfman and Mattelart put it this way: “[u]nderdeveloped peoples take the comics, at second hand, as instructions in the way they are supposed to live and relate to the foreign power center [. . .] Reading Disney is like having one’s own exploited condition rammed with honey down one’s throat” (99). Duckburg, the fictional industrialized country where Donald Duck and other characters live, provides a guide to the underdeveloped on how they should behave regarding the developed, capitalist world.
For Dorfman and Mattelart, Disney and other American cultural imports are not only a cultural imperialist concern, dominating the market to the detriment of more local forms of the culture industry, but also pose a real economic danger in that they serve to underscore the importance of the capitalist system of inequality between the developed and underdeveloped world.

Dorfman and Mattelart are not the only theorists to explore cultural imperialism. Eight years before How to Read Donald Duck was written, Antonio Pasquali published an analysis of Venezuelan mass media which suggests that North American corporations dominate the culture industry within the country. This economic control of mass culture also includes an ideological facet that permeates Venezuelan mass culture. More of an overarching systemic discussion than that of Dorfman and Mattelart, Pasquali’s complaints stem from the premise that, “[q]uienes controlan la publicidad están manejando, tengan o no conocimiento de ello, la cultura de masas en el país, y un inocente control de inversiones se convierte en control ideológico absoluto de la información en general, en su sentido defensivo y ofensivo” (129). Mass culture is an instrument for ideological propaganda, and, in fact, is a very powerful one according to Pasquali. He envisions mass culture as an educating system which has more power to indoctrinate the masses than the “approved” forms of education like the school systems. For this reason, the cultural imperialism that he perceives is so troubling.

This cultural imperialism takes the form of foreign involvement in the publicity and mass culture spheres. Throughout Latin America, foreign, mainly North American, companies exercise an enormous amount of economic power over mass media through their advertising power.19 Because of this, the mass media is effectively censored in
many issues. Direct interference of North American corporations is combined with an intentional copying of North American systems of mass communication on the part of the media distributors. This becomes doubly problematic for Pasquali, because

Desde la periferia, nuestras élites de la información sólo adoptaron lo negativo.
Sólo hubo quienes mirase hacia Hollywood y Nueva York, y no hacía
Hagerstown o Ann Arbor (grandes centros de televisión educativa), porque desde
Venezuela sólo miraban hacia el Norte los ojos codiciosos de los informadores, en busca de pienso barato para el rebaño nacional de televidentes. (123)

Pasquali describes a situation in which foreign methods and ideologies are being imposed both from without by the foreign corporations and from within by the media elites who are subsuming the national good to their own economic good.

This situation is further exasperated by the lack of governmental involvement in the realm of mass culture, something that García Canclini finds in the late 20th Century. Pasquali describes the increasing privatization of the culture industry in Venezuela starting in the 1930s. He adds that, “[e]sta tendencia se vio favorecida por el impulso a la concentración capitalista típica de esa época; por la aparición en el Mercado de muchas nuevas empresas norteamericanas que transformaron paulatinamente el Mercado publicitario; por un ulterior relajamiento del control estatal en las telecomunicaciones” (133). Pasquali argues that Venezuelan media, which for him can be seen as typically indicative of the rest of Latin America, with some exceptions, has become increasingly commercialized. He cites the increasing frequency and proportion of advertising in the Venezuelan media, which prompts him to state that, “[l]a radio sólo fue desde un comienzo un vehículo para vender publicidad, no un maravilloso instrumento para la
información, la diversión o la instrucción” (225). It is in these terms that Pasquali goes on to espouse the view that the mass media should be a venue for education and for the distribution of cultural capital. He sees the increasing commercialization of the mass media as a very negative phenomenon and complains about the effect of the radio on the listeners:

El radiooyente [. . .] presenta los síntomas más inequívocos de la masificación: vulgarización y aplanamiento del criterio valorativo; congelamiento de toda aspiración a lo mejor; resignación absoluta ante la aplastante unilateralidad del medio; creencia de poseer, sin embargo, lo mejor, típico de ser culturalmente metamorfoseado; situación patológica del “amor al verdugo”; necesidad creciente de pienso embrutecedor y decreciente de estímulos culturales, subsiguiente al proceso de involución. (240)

The mass media becomes synonymous with deficient taste (vulgarization), with lack of critical capacity and with a sense of distance from the “best” culturally speaking.

This descent into the abyss of cultural apathy is reinforced by the fact that the majority of the mass media that is consumed in Venezuela (especially in terms of television and film), comes from North America. This fact is even more exasperating for Pasquali because, from his point of view, Venezuela has the technological and industrial capacity for creating its own cultural products. He explains that, despite the fact that the Venezuelan film industry is capable of production, it lacks crucial elements needed for filmmaking. That is, there are few scriptwriters, nor does the Venezuelan film industry engage in the process of obtaining the rights to existing material. What Pasquali
describes is a film industry that has effectively cut off its own head due to its disinclination to employ local talent, restricting its ability to produce local products.

Pascuali hopes for the liberation of Venezuelan mass culture for Venezuelan cultural production. He places Venezuela along with Argentina as the two countries that can aspire to be a part of what Herman Kahn calls “consumos masivos” by the year 2000 (410). This means that Venezuela has the potential to be among the most industrialized nations of Latin America. It also has the ability to serve as both a benchmark for development in the region as well as a source for large scale cultural production. As a benchmark nation, Pascuali also concedes that,

si en las próximas décadas no dejamos de ser el hinterland que abastece de materias primas a las potencias del hemisferio Norte (y de ser, a la vez, su periferia cultural), es altamente probable que tal situación sea la de todo el continente, en forma siempre más irreversible (411).

To achieve cultural independence, Pascuali champions more governmental intervention in the area of mass culture. He supports protectionist policies that favor Venezuelan production in order to give the faltering Venezuelan culture industry the time and support it needs to find a place in the market.²⁰

The cultural imperialism argument sees foreign mass culture dominating local mass culture. Although these arguments certainly carry a great deal of weight, in some ways they are also very one sided. For example, Pasquali champions the inclusion of native mass culture as García Canclini will do later. While Pasquali seeks to liberate the culture industry from market forces, giving it the space to work as a medium for education, the possibility for control still exists. One can look at the dissemination of
false information by the government through the media during the Malvinas War in Argentina to see an example of this. Although certainly not a situation of foreign domination, there exists the possibility that a government-controlled culture industry will simply perpetuate the domination paradigm, not necessarily creating a situation of imperialism but certainly one of control. For the culture industry to function as Pasquali hopes and not fall into the very situation that he is lamenting, it needs controlling measures that do not replace commercial interests with political ones.

Tomlinson’s work on cultural imperialism has also complicated a strict cultural imperialist attitude towards culture, as Pasquali, Dorfman and Mattelart do. He argues that, “[w]hat dogs the critique of cultural imperialism is the problem of explaining how a cultural practice can be imposed in a context which is no longer actually coercive” (173). In essence, the critique of cultural imperialism recognizes the heterogeneous nature of cultures and groups. To say that North American culture is exercising cultural hegemony over Latin American culture is to assume that Latin American culture is itself homogenous and that the nation or the collective can speak for the whole. Moreover, Tomlinson states the rather obvious point that North American popular culture has the possibility of control due to the fact that people like it. That is, if the potential imperialist culture were not attractive, the whole argument would be pointless because of the lack of consumption. As Tomlinson notes, many times individuals consume foreign mass culture with a conscious recognition of the cultural imperialist argument; some consumers utilize foreign / North American mass culture even though it defies their personal ideology on imperialism and cultural imperialism. Tomlinson gives the example of Ien Ang’s study of the television serial “Dallas”. In this study, Ang found that, “some
[correspondents] did indeed, like Ang herself, manage to resolve a conflict between their distaste for the ideology of the show and a pleasure in watching it” (Tomlinson 46). Ang’s study also went on to show that in many cultures, the consumers merely glossed over distasteful parts of “Dallas” that did not meet with their cultural expectations and reinterpreted, sometimes completely, other parts of the show to better fit in with their own culture. The idea that North American mass culture can pose a complete cultural imperialist threat is not as simple as it seems at first.

Due in part to the complications that Tomlinson points out, recent criticism has begun to favor the term “globalization” over “cultural imperialism.” Tomlinson notes the lack of intentionality with the processes of cultural imperialism as the context shifts to one of globalization. Tomlinson states,

Globalization may be distinguished from imperialism in that it is a far less coherent or culturally directed process. For all that it is ambiguous between economic and political senses, the idea of imperialism contains, at least, the notion of a purposeful project: the intended spread of a social system from one center of power across the globe. (175)

The fact remains, especially in light of Pasquali’s work, that in some cases the only mass culture that is available for consumption is that of North America, which gives North American cultural products a de facto monopoly on the market. If one is going to consume these products they cannot be local because the culture industry simply does not exist on any significant scale. Thus, the idea of cultural imperialism gives way to a recognition of the more ambiguous process of globalization. However, it certainly does not lessen the importance of these ideas in the historical context of the 60s and 70s when
many Latin American theorists argued passionately against cultural domination from the Western (mostly North American) culture industry. What the writers and theorists of the 1960s and 1970s who are interested in culture have to confront is this very inclusion of the North American mass culture which is so prevalent in their countries. Writers like José Agustín and the other Onda writers, as well as Manuel Puig, have to come to terms with the cultural imperialist argument and justify their use of mass culture as an important part of their aesthetic vision. That is, these writers find themselves in the position of accepting and using North American mass culture in their works as a part of their generational identity (which is connected to a sense of resistance) while at the same time still recognizing the possibility of cultural imperialism (domination). In the postmodern globalized world, the preoccupation with sustainability and cultural production does not disappear completely, it simply takes a new form.

**Modernization and the Current State of Mass Culture in Latin America.**

If ideas of national populism and cultural imperialism seem to dominate discourse on mass culture in Latin America in the 60’s and 70’s, the changes that come with a shift towards a neoliberal economic ideology also modify the focus on the debate of mass culture in Latin America. At the same time, this debate maintains the two larger tenets of domination and resistance. It is also important to remember that one of the results of the focus on industrialization and modernization in Latin America is an ever increasing urbanization. Many Latin American cities are no longer metropolises, but rather megalopolises. Returning to the example of Mexico City, the population expands even more dramatically from 5 million in 1960 to 15 million in 1990. The creation of these sprawling urban centers dramatically changes the face of local as well as regional identity.
where citizens find themselves relating more to their neighborhoods and sections of the city than they do to the national or even urban identity (García Canclini Consumers 57). As we shall see, this means that the influence of mass culture is one that should not be ignored, given that a large part of mass culture is imported and that according to García Canclini, “almost all homes in Mexico City have television and radio” (Consumers 74).

Jesús Martín Barbero separates the focus on mass culture from the populism of pre 1960s Latin America to a new phase that he states begins in the 1960s. This new phase “was associated with development, a new understanding of the ideas of progress. Development was taken as an objective step forward that could be quantified both in terms of economic growth and in its ‘natural’ consequence, political democratization” (178). Martín-Barbero highlights the idea that consumption of first world cultural goods also indicates a shift towards a first world economic position. Television becomes a homogenizing medium for Martín-Barbero in this stage, which “tends to absorb differences as much as possible” (181). The change towards a cult to progress, which also brings about economic changes, has its end objective in the free market policies of neoliberalism. By opening up national markets to transnational corporations, Latin American countries hope to both shore up their economies as well as to elevate their global status to take their place among the first world.

Néstor García Canclini recognizes this shift from the national populist ideologies of the first half of the twentieth century to a different perspective. He cites the neoliberal policies and subsequent loss of national economic autonomy as fundamental in this shift. With the opening of markets, government control is greatly lessened and as such, “América Latina se está quedando sin proyectos nacionales. La pérdida de control sobre
las economías de cada país se manifiesta en la desaparición de la moneda propia (Ecuador, El Salvador), en sus devaluaciones frecuentes (Brasil, México, Perú, Venezuela) o en la fijación maníaca al dólar (Argentina)” (Culturas híbridas, XVI). The effective loss of economic power also leads to a crisis of national identity to some degree.

With less emphasis being placed upon import substitution industrialization, Latin American nations lose some of the cohesiveness that to this point had characterized their cultural production. The need to create a national identity loses its way in the midst of cultural products imported from abroad. In this case, Hollywood finds a place of equal importance with national myths and autochthonous figures.

In addition to the loss of a national project comes a shift towards an aesthetic of pastiche and combination. The rigid categories of the past are supplanted with hybrid creations. García Canclini emphasizes that,

A los jóvenes de hace treinta años les preocupaba cómo acortar la distancia entre lo culto y lo popular; ahora, a los universitarios y profesionales jóvenes en América Latina les aflige cómo flotar en lo que queda del mundo culto y de la clase media; si son colombianos o ecuatorianos, las preguntas son cómo y a dónde irse. (Culturas híbridas XVII)

While earlier, there was a conscious effort to bridge this gap between high and low culture, according to García Canclini, now the experience of culture is a more passive one of reception of the various types of culture that one experiences.

This economic shift occurs at the moment where postmodern theory is starting to take center stage. Critics at this point begin to take a more serious look at consumption and production of mass culture as a fundamental part of the postmodern experience.
Thus, it is perhaps judicious to examine how postmodern theorists and thinkers react to the idea of the masses and mass culture before continuing with the discussion of mass culture in Latin America.

**Postmodernism and the Culture Industry: Domination and Resistance in a New Context.**

Postmodernism represents a shift in the critical perspective regarding the world and cultural production. Theories of postmodernism of necessity must address issues of the culture industry and mass culture, given that one of the principal barriers that postmodern fiction seeks to break down is precisely that between high and low culture. Postmodern theory inherits the dynamic of mass culture as domination or mass culture as resistance that comes from Adorno and Benjamin.

Andreas Huyssen, in *After the Great Divide*, gives an insightful analysis of mass culture and postmodernism, looking at the beginnings of the mass culture debate with Adorno and Benjamin and taking this idea through the postmodern debates. Huyssen starts with the assumption that the idea of postmodernism is neither a positive nor a negative one. He suggests that, “we explore the question whether postmodernism might not harbor productive contradictions, perhaps even a critical and oppositional potential” (200), in order to save it from such reductionist maniquean arguments. Huyssen argues that postmodernism is a continuation of the avant-garde’s rejection of the institution of art. As a rejection of modernism which is the institutionalized form of high art, postmodernism clearly places itself in a position of rejection. Huyssen explains that:

There emerged a vigorous, though again largely uncritical attempt to validate popular culture as a challenge to the canon of high art, modernist or traditional.
This “populist” trend of the 1960’s with its celebration of rock ‘n’ roll and folk music, of the imagery of everyday life and of the multiple forms of popular literature gained much of its energy in the context of the counter-culture and by a next to total abandonment of an earlier American tradition of a critique of modern mass culture. (194)

Postmodern art utilizes mass culture as a means of rejection to the traditional canons of elitist art; that is, it uses mass culture in order to eliminate the separation between popular and high art, a concept that connects Huysen’s argument with that made by Benjamin. If postmodern art dabbles in the inclusion of mass culture and other forms of popular culture in the 1960s, the postmodern art forms of the 1970s increasingly separate the line between high and popular art. Huysen describes this spirit of loose boundaries that encompasses postmodern art by stating that, “[t]he possibilities for experimental meshing and mixing of mass culture and modernism seemed promising and produced some of the most successful and ambitious art and literature of the 1970’s” (198). Thus, the postmodern’s free use of both mass culture and modernism’s high art has produced a rich body of work that falls in the framework of art and literature, but what about mass culture itself?

For Huysen, the postmodern condition of art is above all one of friction between varying fields of culture and influence. He explains that, “postmodernism [. . .] operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first” (216-217). It is this constant tension between traditional oppositions that gives postmodern art an avenue for resistance. For Huysen, the postmodern does not
reject outright the separation between high art and mass culture; it does not look for a situation in which all art is the same. What the postmodern does is question the value assigned to the different categories: high art as the maximum expression of artistic talent and mass culture as simple art.\textsuperscript{23} Something else that comes with dialogue on postmodernism is a change in the context of the debate. Huyssen states that, “modernism’s running feud with mass society and mass culture as well as the avantgarde’s attack on high art as a support system of cultural hegemony always took place on the pedestal of high art itself” (218). From the 1960s, due to the tensions that the postmodern texts create, the ability to clearly categorize texts has become much more difficult. The very concept of high art and mass culture has become entwined in this debate with some texts potentially falling into both categories. As Huyssen argues, “artistic activities have become much more diffuse and harder to contain in safe categories or stable institutions such as the academy, the museum or even the established gallery network” (219). I would add that in the postmodern, activities not traditionally considered “artistic” have also made their way into academic / high art circles; that is, the process is certainly not one sided. Take, for example exhibits dedicated to film, comic book art, or any number of products of the culture industries that find their way into the bastion of high art, museum exhibits. There are even whole museums dedicated to mass culture like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio. A final example that characterizes this increased elimination of boundaries is the global Planet Hollywood or Hard Rock Café phenomenon wherein a restaurant, that is, a place of leisure and socialization as well as commerce, is combined with a museum ethos through the exhibition of significant mass culture paraphernalia.
Huyssen concludes by stating that, “a postmodernist culture emerging from these political, social, and cultural constellations will have to be a postmodernism of resistance [. . .] Resistance will always have to be specific and contingent upon the cultural field within which it operates. It cannot be defined simply in terms of negativity or nonidentity à la Adorno, nor will the litanies of a totalizing, collective project suffice” (220-221). As stated earlier, Huyssen sees resistance in the tension that postmodernism produces between categories for which modernism drew distinct separations, like mass culture and high art. This tension, for Huyssen, is the positive force of postmodernism and any mode of decreasing or pacifying the tension would destroy the effectiveness of the postmodern ethos. He states that, “[t]he point is to heighten that tension, even to rediscover it and to bring it back into focus in the arts as well as in criticism [. . .] It’s our problem and our hope” (221). Huyssen envisions postmodernism as a force of resistance in which the system does not try to subvert per se the realm of high art and mass culture, but rather to emphasize the tensions and contradictions inherent in the modernist paradigm.

Postmodernism not only responds to a change in attitude towards the culture industry and mass culture, but also engages in a rethinking of the idea of the masses. Postmodernism challenges the idea about what the masses are, how they function and what can be assumed about them. Postmodernism gives the masses a much more active and revolutionary function that questions the absolute power of the culture industry.

Jean Baudrillard sees postmodernism as a form of resistance through the concept of the masses. The masses become, for Baudrillard, “the ecstasy of the social, the ecstatic form of the social, the mirror where it is reflected in all its immanence” (10-11).
The ecstatic form of the social, for Baudrillard, means that the masses become the extreme of the idea of the social, the social taken to its limit. They are the symbol of counterculture. The ecstasy of the social is a concept of the social interactions of individuals that sees the masses as a force for social change. It is this ecstatic form of the social through which flow the “inverse energies of the antisocial, of inertia, resistance, and silence” (10-11).

The masses play, in postmodern times, a different role in the media (the culture industry) and have a different relationship to power. For Baudrillard, the masses, upon being objectified and at the same time silenced, defy the power of the homogenizing agent. Baudrillard states that, “[the masses] are not at all an object of oppression and manipulation. The masses do not have to be liberated and, in any case, they cannot be. All their (transpolitical) power is in being there as pure object – that is to say, in opposing their silence and their absence of desire against any political wish to make them speak” (94). To clarify this idea, Baudrillard uses the imagery of the hostage. The masses are hostages to those who manipulate them, but, as with any hostage situation, the masses exert power over their captors at the same time that they are subject to their power.

Baudrillard states that:

The masses are the absolute prototype of the hostage, of the thing taken hostage, that is, annulled in its sovereignty, abolished and non-existent as subject – but take note – radically inexchangeable as object. As with the hostage, there is nothing one can do with him, and one doesn’t know how to get rid of him. This is the unforgettable revenge of the hostage, and the unforgettable revenge of the
masses. This is the fatality of manipulation: that it can never be, or take the place of, strategy. (44)

Baudrillard envisions a world in which the mutually parasitic relationship between the masses and the culture industry are inextricably tied to the question of power: the masses hold power over the culture industry due to their economic and aesthetic abilities, while the culture industry holds the power to manipulate public opinion.

The masses that Baudrillard talks about occupy a postmodern world which, in order to subvert the metanarratives of the past, pushes them to their extreme and also to their opposite. He states that, “things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them: by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason” (7). The extremes that society has arrived at, as evidenced by the masses as the ecstatic of the social, also affect the role of the culture industry. As stated earlier, Baudrillard no longer sees the culture industry as a closed system which affects, but is not affected (the proposition of Adorno regarding mass culture as mass deception), but rather as a more organic and fragile apparatus. Baudrillard affirms that while for the culture industry: “[i]t might still be a matter of seduction, but exactly of the opposite kind – no longer the subversion of the masses by the media, but instead the subversion of the media by the masses, in their strategy of disappearance on the horizon of the media” (86). The focus shifts from the outlet to the receptor; the consumer is the true power in this system. What Baudrillard alludes to is the market sensibility of cultural production. Authors, producers, television stations, all
create their products with an eye towards what will sell. It is through this that the masses
gain their power, although there is still room for domination in this.

While Baudrillard and Huyssen use postmodernism to argue for mass culture, or
the masses, as a form of resistance to entrenched concepts of culture, postmodernism is
also used to give weight to the idea of mass culture as domination. Just as Benjamin’s
ideas seem to gain the upper hand in the critical debate, Adorno returns to balance the
debate along with theorists like Fredric Jameson.

According to Jameson, any theory of postmodernism has its origin in the idea of
the culture industry inherited from Horkheimer and Adorno. Jameson sees cultural
production as subsumed to market needs, as did Horkheimer and Adorno. Indeed,
Jameson states that, “in postmodern culture, ‘culture’ has become a product in its own
right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any
of the items it includes within itself” (Postmodernism x). The postmodern, with its
commodification of culture, is a result of the third stage of capitalism in which all aspects
of life are subsumed to market concerns. This is important because, for Jameson, art no
longer acts independently of market forces, but takes these forces into account. Art
becomes what can sell, rather than having an independent worth of its own.

Jameson also talks about an “aesthetic populism” in the postmodern. Postmodern
artifacts, for Jameson, hold an appeal to the popular, in the form of kitsch and pastiche.
Eliminating the barriers between high and low culture, art and commodity, postmodern
artifacts look to attract the general public. Jameson emphasizes this by stating that,
the postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole
“degraded” landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest
culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade B Hollywood films, of so called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply “quote” as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance. (Postmodernism 2-3)

Jameson sees in the postmodern a transition from art utilizing mass culture to art being a part of mass culture. The example of Joyce or Mahler emphasizes the difference in the approach to mass culture that occurs in postmodernism. Jameson argues that while modernist texts make use of mass culture, the postmodern text becomes a part of mass culture in its own right. This fusion of the postmodern text and mass culture is in part due to the commodification of art. What Jameson sees in postmodernism is exactly what Jean Baudrillard alludes to, all products of postmodernism subsume themselves to the market. In this case, art is no longer a separate entity that could serve the modernist ideal of aesthetic perfection or innovation, but rather becomes merely another product to be sold and is produced with the idea of selling it rather than with any sense of artistic value. It is also through this loss of artistic value that Jameson sees in postmodernism its separation from the modernist text, which can utilize a mass cultural aesthetic or theme. For him, the postmodern text simply becomes another part of mass culture rather than trying to maintain the separation between the two.

Within this framework, Jameson makes a clear distinction between modernist art and mass culture. He couches the argument in terms of the means and the end, and implies that for modernist art, the means has as much importance as the end. In
contemporary fiction, however, “you read ‘for the ending’ – the bulk of the pages becoming sheer devalued means to an end – in this case, the ‘solution’ – which is itself utterly insignificant insofar as we are not thereby in the real world,” (“Reification” 132). The devalued genres that Jameson cites (airport literature, the romance novel, science fiction, etc.) place importance only on the ending and not on the aesthetic experience. In this way, mass culture becomes a simplified or simplistic version of modernist art. Jameson states that modernist art and mass culture are intimately entangled with issues of social and political preoccupations. The difference lies in the fact that while “modernism tends to handle this material by producing compensatory structures of various kinds, mass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony” (“Reification” 141). Modernism, for Jameson, confronts the social anxieties and suggests solutions; mass culture simply does away with them in the perfect Hollywood ending. Jameson emphasizes this by recognizing the need of the consumer of mass culture for repetition and categories. He states that, “[t]he atomized or serial ‘public’ of mass culture wants to see the same thing over and over, hence the urgency of the generic structure and the generic signal” (“Reification” 137).

The postmodernism that Jameson describes combines resistance, but in a negative sense, with domination. Postmodernism eliminates the separation between high and low culture, which is a resistance to these forms, but for Jameson this is the danger of postmodernism. In doing this, postmodernism succumbs to aesthetic disintegration which in turn facilitates the domination of the masses by the culture industry through the perfect Hollywood ending. Postmodernism, through its resistance to the traditional
separations, in fact allows the domination of the masses because they no longer are able
to consume an aesthetic object, but are rather reading for the ending.

**Postmodernism from a Latin American Perspective.**

Postmodernism in Latin American and Latin American studies follows the trends of dominance and resistance regarding mass culture that one finds in the works of Huyssen, Baudrillard and Jameson, simply in a Latin American context.²⁶ Norbert Lechner, for instance, states that Latin America is situated in a unique position of being able to anticipate global trends and is thus on the cutting edge due to its historical context. Lechner connects postmodernity to disenchantment with modernization. He also acknowledges the crisis of national identity as a part of the postmodern state, observing that “postmodern disenchantment usually expresses itself precisely as a loss of faith in the state. The state is perceived, more than anything else, as an apparatus of domination, always suspected of seeking totalitarian control” (130). As such, the loss of the national character is a manifestation of the postmodern condition in the Latin American context. Although Lechner does not specifically mention mass culture in his analysis of postmodernism, the very language that he uses alludes to the domination / resistance paradigm that this study seeks to explore in the realm of mass culture. Lechner argues that Latin American postmodernism is a rejection (resistance to) the absolute control (domination) of the state. Given the involvement of many Latin American nations in their mass culture as a form of national identity building, from the radio dramas of the 1930s or 1940s Argentina to the film industry of the 1940s Mexico, this rejection that Lechner finds in postmodernity could be considered a rejection of the domination of the culture industries in Latin America.
John Beverley also explores the idea of postmodernity in the Latin American context. He sees in postmodernism the appropriation by “high” literature of the culture industry for purposes, once again, of “high” literature rather than the dissolution of the traditional barriers. He explains that:

The problem [. . .] is that postmodernism may perpetuate unconsciously the modernist aesthetic ideology that it supposedly displaces by transferring the formalist program of dehabitation of perception from the sphere of high culture to the forms of mass culture, now seen as more aesthetically dynamic and effective. [. . .] But this is essentially *intellectual* appropriation of mass culture, by intellectuals of the traditional type which produces something akin to a “pop” form of the Romantic sublime. (225-26)

Instead of destabilizing the cultural system, as others propose, Beverley sees postmodernism as reinforcing the inequalities between high culture and mass culture. High culture can use the forms of mass culture in order to self propagate, but mass culture cannot enable a reversal of the system. In this way, mass culture becomes a force of domination of culture, imposing “high” culture through the medium of the mass industry. Instead of a resistance, or rejection of the separation between the cultural forms that the positive view of postmodernism and of mass culture includes, Beverley astutely recognizes this phenomenon as another imposition on mass culture from above that simply exploits the mass culture medium without allowing for an equal exchange.

Beverley’s comments are very interesting in light of the current trend of cultural studies. In many ways, cultural studies uses more mass culture or popular cultural artifacts as the object of study in order to lift them up to the same level as literary study.
When done well, this is a laudable approach to culture. The problem arises in the intellectual appropriation of these different cultural productions which equates various, non-homogenous cultural forms. To study mass culture is not bad, but to study mass culture in the same way that one studies complex highly experimental narrative can result in devaluing both mass culture and the high culture narrative. One must take into account the audience and the purpose of the texts in order to effectively use both mass culture as well as traditional “high” culture. Otherwise, the tendency is to set up a new system whereby cultural artifacts that do not pretend to have any “high” art value are elevated to this level, thereby destroying the context and the importance of the mass culture artifact.

A correlate to this is the situation by which the intellectual / academy finds its way into mass culture. As García Canclini states, “[s]e considera cada vez más legítimo que los universitarios reconviertan su capital simbólico en espacios de la cultura masiva y de la popular, sobre todo si tienen rasgos equivalentes con el mundo intelectual” (Culturas híbridas 336). At the same time that the academy appropriates mass culture and elevates it to the same status of “high” art, the culture industry also appropriates the academy. The expert can be seen on any television station or, for that matter, any form of mass culture product. In fact, the media have their favorite expert; if a topic deals with the Middle East, for example, they always go to Professor X of Such and Such University. Through this fusion of the academic culture and the media culture, the argument for domination is strengthened. Any form of media production has some constraints, whether they are economic or ideological. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the phenomenon of the expert experiences indirect, but significant constraints on expression and dialogue. He states that “open access to television is offset by a powerful censorship,
a loss of independence linked to the conditions imposed on those who speak on television. Above all, time limits make it highly unlikely that anything can be said” (On Television 15). Through the time constraint, the expert is forced into the position of facilitating domination, telling the audience what to think rather than giving it information and allowing the consumer to pass through the thought process himself. Instead of García Canclini’s “consumption is good for thinking” (Consumers 37), Bourdieu and Beatriz Sarlo propose that “consumption eliminates the need for thought”, and often this is achieved through the expert, whose authority is convincing.

The phenomenon of the expert as opposed to the intellectual is one which worries many opponents of postmodernism. Beatriz Sarlo decries the development of the expert stating, “[h]oy la batalla parece ganada por los expertos: nunca se presentan como portadores de valores generales que trasciendan la esfera de expertise, y en consecuencia, tampoco se hacen cargo de los resultados políticos y sociales de los actos fundados en ella” (Escenas 180). Part of this problem comes from a disinclination to consider the experts’ actions as political, even though they inevitably have political consequences. Their position as an expert gives their statements and actions an aura of impartiality. Sarlo explains that, “[l]os medios de comunicación de masas (en especial el periodismo escrito) dan una puntada más a esta trama donde los expertos consiguen que sus juicios parezcan objetivos por el recurso de asignarle objetividad a la práctica técnico-científica” (Escenas 181). Mass media utilizes the expert not necessarily to give a subjective opinion, but certainly to help support a subjective position. The expert’s aura of impartiality thus contributes to the power of the mass media to persuade the masses of the
specific point of view; that is, mass media uses the expert as a force of domination over the masses.

Continuing the mass culture as domination argument, Beatriz Sarlo agrees with John Beverley that postmodernism is a valid expression of the Latin American experience. She differs in that she sees the separation between high and popular culture as a positive one. For Sarlo, postmodernism has eroded the place of art and culture in society. She states that, “[l]a Argentina, como casi todo Occidente, vive en una creciente homogeneización cultural, donde la pluralidad de ofertas no compensa la pobreza de ideales colectivos, y cuyo rasgo básico es, al mismo tiempo, el extremo individualismo” (Escenas 7). Postmodernism is a homogeneization that emphasizes at least the myth of individualism and for Sarlo, this state of homogenized culture is one that erodes the ability to think and leads to a collective apathy. Sarlo, above all, sees postmodernism as a separation of the individual from that which is real. The individual loses his / her connection with both the local and many times with the global, and does this through the medium of mass culture (through television, film and videogames). This separation leaves the individual less likely to think and more likely to be open to domination. In conjunction with the shift from intellectual to expert, mass culture also creates a situation in which intellectual dialogue is weakened through mass media forums. She states that,

Las ideas generales tampoco podrían entregarse a la única fábrica que las produce en cantidad: los medios de comunicación audiovisuales que, beneficiados por el estallido de los grandes centros modernos de construcción ideológica, nos ofrecen, al abrigo de toda sospecha de parcialidad, casi todas las ficciones de lo social que consumimos. (Escenas 191)
Mass culture fills the void left by a connection with the real, telling the consumer how to interact, and more importantly how to react in the social sphere. The individual thus loses his / her individuality and freedom through the domination of the culture industry.

Sarlo recognizes the economic and cultural relevance of the culture industry; she states that, “[l]a industria cultural (el cine, la televisión, los discos, la organización de eventos musicales, la edición) tiene más poder económico de lo que alguna vez se atrevieron a soñar los fundadores de un imperio como Hollywood” (Escenas 131). The problem lies in the fact that the culture industry, which in its inception had not yet conquered traditional art and culture, now has the power to dictate the cultural market and the form of art. This leads to a situation where, “en la segunda mitad del siglo XX, la ampliación estratificada de los públicos y la experimentación estética corren por caminos divergentes que se intersectan sólo en algunos casos totalmente excepcionales” (Escenas 133). Thus, art and the masses become even further removed and Sarlo describes a situation in which, as opposed to the earlier brand of more “intellectual” mass culture, film and other products of the culture industry become increasingly more formulaic and devoid of artistic merit.27

Postmodernism, for Sarlo, exemplifies the unification or homogeneization of culture to the detriment of creativity and diversity of expression. Sarlo concludes by stating categorically that not all culture is equal and cautioning against a cultural pluralism that seeks to equate all culture. She does not come to a clear decision on how to go about solving the problems that she elucidates, but rather leaves the discussion open, stating “[e]l pensamiento crítico no es una solución a este nudo. Es, solamente, una perspectiva: la puerta estrecha todavía no se ha cerrado” (Escenas 196). It is clear that
Sarlo sees the pastiche, fast audiovisual postmodern culture as a sign of general decay in society. For Sarlo, mass culture through its domination of the cultural scene, works as a force of domination over the masses, which in turn facilitates the intellectual and social decline that she describes.

Taking a stance much more reminiscent of Benjamin than Sarlo’s idea of mass culture as mass domination, Néstor García Canclini enters into the debate on the interplay between mass culture, society and the idea of high culture within a globalizing and postmodern context. García Canclini offers a curious and at times contradictory version of mass culture which sees it as both positive as well as negative, a form of resistance as well as a paradigm of domination.

In Culturas híbridas (1989), García Canclini attempts to find a resolution to the shifting and even fusing fields of popular culture and traditional culture through the metaphor of hybridization; which at the same time alludes to a sense of resistance to the strict separation of “high” and “popular” culture. The key to García Canclini’s argument is that due to the change in attitude of the Latin American collective, culture and modernity manifest themselves in a spirit and practice of hybridization. This hybridity is one that recognizes a give and take among the various manifestations of culture; that is mass culture takes from “high” culture just as “high” culture in turn is influenced by mass culture. Hybridization becomes necessary because the changes that have affected Latin America, and indeed any region that is part of a postmodern society, do not permit a “pure” and separate form of culture. The postmodern Latin America is a world “visto como efervescencia discontinua de imágenes, el arte como fast-food. Esta cultura pret-à-pensé permite des-pensar los acontecimientos históricos sin preocuparse por
entenderlos” (Culturas híbridas 285). In terms of cultural production, these changes are manifested in the fragmentation and reconstitution of social and cultural status. García Canclini states that “[e]l posmodernismo no es un estilo sino la copresencia tumultuosa de todos, el lugar donde los capítulos de la historia del arte y del folclor se cruzan entre sí con las nuevas tecnologías culturales” (Culturas híbridas 307). Because of this coexistence of all styles, which is certainly conflictive at times, the traditional conceptions of style do not work. According to García Canclini, “[a]sí como no funciona la oposición abrupta entre lo tradicional y lo moderno, tampoco lo culto, lo popular y lo masivo están donde nos habituamos a encontrarlos” (Culturas híbridas 14). The hybridity of the cultural artifact resists the entrenched ideas of culture and due to this it is necessary to find a space of interdependency.

For García Canclini, these changes have much to do with the modernizing project of Latin America. For him, “[l]a modernización disminuye el papel de lo culto y lo popular tradicionales en el conjunto del mercado simbólico, pero no los suprime. Reubica el arte y el folclor, el saber académico y la cultura industrializada, bajo condiciones relativamente semejantes” (Culturas híbridas 18). The processes of modernization, in other words, function as the rupture between high and low culture, all due to the requirements of the market. Modernization works as a facilitator to the resistance of traditional separations. Although García Canclini does not view the market as negatively as Horkheimer and Adorno, he thinks it plays a very real and important role in the creation and transmission of culture. The processes of modernization, specifically, seek an emancipating project which end in the creation of autonomous secularized cultural markets. While these markets may be autonomous, artistic production in no way
is seen as autonomous. García Canclini agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno in recognizing that artistic production is intimately tied to market concerns of consumption. To this end, he states that, “[m]ientras los teóricos e historiadores exaltan la autonomía del arte, las prácticas del mercado y de la comunicación masiva – incluídos a veces los museos – fomentan la dependencia de los bienes artísticos de procesos extraestéticos.” (Culturas híbridas 32). No art, or cultural production, can exist in a vacuum and one must take into consideration the market for these cultural goods.

In order to fully articulate the hybridity that the postmodern market exhibits, García Canclini distinguishes between three types of culture: popular culture, mass culture and high culture. While the distinction between high and low (in this case popular and mass culture) is relatively easy to discern, “[l]o popular es en esta historia lo excluído: los que no tienen patrimonio [. . .] los espectadores de los medios masivos que quedan fuera de las universidades y los museos, ‘incapaces’ de leer y mirar la alta cultura porque desconocen la historia de los saberes y los estilos” (Culturas híbridas 191), differentiating between popular culture and mass culture is somewhat more problematic given the intimate connection between the two. For this reason, García Canclini makes a distinct separation between the idea of tradition and that of impermanence. The culture industry is one that has no background, no past. However, García Canclini does not dwell on these differences. In fact he states that, “[s]e avanzaría más en el conocimiento de la cultura y de lo popular si se abandonara la preocupación sanitaria por distinguir lo que tendrían de puro e incontaminado el arte o las artesanías, y los estudiáramos desde las incertidumbres que provocan sus cruces” (Culturales 227). Just as the hybridity which García Canclini describes eliminates the strict barriers between these categories, the
discussion of this phenomenon also needs to discard the various “separate” forms of culture. These categories and encapsulations serve only to hinder the study of cultural processes. In this spirit, García Canclini recognizes the power of mass communication in disseminating culture (both popular and high). He states that, while the culture industry was seen as a major threat to traditional popular culture, “[l]a redistribución de los bienes simbólicos tradicionales por los canales electrónicos de comunicación genera interacciones más fluidas entre lo culto y lo popular, lo tradicional y lo moderno” (Culturas 183). That is, the medium of mass culture actually works to facilitate the interaction between various seemingly disparate cultures: “high” and popular culture, traditional and modern culture. For example, consumers of mass culture have access to cultural programs through information media that allow them to “enter” museums or connect with other art forms without having to leave the confines of their home. This bridging is a form of resistance in that it eliminates the elitist position of some forms of culture, allowing them to be accessible to all, or at least to all who have the privileged position of access to mass media. Related to the idea that mass culture functions as a medium for other culture, García Canclini mentions the collusion of museums and mass media, stating that, “[h]oy debemos reconocer que las alianzas, involuntarias o deliberadas, de los museos con los medios masivos y el turismo, han sido más eficaces para la difusión cultural que los intentos de los artistas por sacar el arte a la calle” (Culturas 159).

It is this blend or pastiche of cultures which marks the postmodern attitude. Mass culture, in fusing with other forms of culture, becomes a vehicle for education and for cultural consumption, and it has no option but to fuse into the hybrid forms of culture that
García Canclini envisions. His view of the postmodern world is one that does not allow for rigidity. The idea of what constitutes a cultured consumer and a popular consumer has also changed. Throughout his text, García Canclini provides insights into what he considers “ser culto.” One of the most significant is that “[l]as culturas ya no se agrupan en conjuntos fijos y estables, y por tanto desaparece la posibilidad de ser culto conociendo el repertorio de ‘las grandes obras’, o ser popular porque se maneja el sentido de los objetos y mensajes producidos por una comunidad más o menos cerrada” (Culturas híbridas 283). It is not sufficient to understand “the best that has been thought and said in the world.” The criterion are much more complicated in a postmodern world because now “todas las culturas son de frontera” (Culturas híbridas 325).29 Along with this, García Canclini argues that the urban character of many citizens forces them to participate within a variety of cultural communities that value different forms of culture: from popular to “high” culture, from traditional to modern culture. The postmodern identity for García Canclini, and with it the idea of hybridization is specifically the ability to interact with a variety of cultural products, which in turn interact with each other, thus rejecting an elitist vision of art and culture.

Rethinking Cultural Imperialism: García Canclini and Consumer Culture.

It is these ideas of hybridity and the multiplicity of cultures that García Canclini uses as a force of resistance to the domination idea of cultural imperialism. Regarding economic and cultural imperialism he states, “ese modelo es insuficiente para entender las actuales relaciones de poder. No explica el funcionamiento planetario de un sistema industrial, tecnológico, financiero y cultural, cuya sede no está en una sola nación sino en una densa red de estructuras económicas e ideologías” (Culturas híbridas 289). García
Canclini goes on to state that the electronic technologies, like the Internet, have helped to break down the system of center and periphery that cultural imperialism implies. This results in a transnationalization of the culture industry in which a mass culture product cannot succeed without a wide base of consumership throughout the world. For this reason, products of the culture industry have increasingly more universal themes and plots. García Canclini states that,

Se promueve un “cine-mundo” que busca usar tecnología visual más sofisticada y las estrategias de marketing para lograr insertarse en todos los continentes.

Coppola, Spielberg y Lucas, por ejemplo, construyen narraciones espectaculares a partir de mitos inteligibles para todos los espectadores con independencia de su cultura, nivel educativo, historia nacional, desarrollo económico o régimen político. (‘Narrar’ 12)

Without a clear center for either the culture industry or the products of this industry, as is clear with the increasing consumption of local culture in the periphery, the force of domination has no substance, but rather becomes an amorphous, ambiguous entity without real weight. On one hand, García Canclini subverts the idea of cultural imperialism by signaling the decentralization of mass culture and the increasing sustainability of local cultural production; mass culture no longer has a strong geographical center. On the other hand, the recognition of the fluidity of culture also works to complicate the idea of cultural imperialism. He states that culture of all types, “high”, popular and mass, are fluid and prone to influence. While this could work into the cultural imperialist argument that one dominant foreign culture affects the local
culture, García Canclini explores how the local culture can make use of the foreign in a more symbiotic way.

In a study about local indigenous festivals, García Canclini examines the influence of a capitalist ideology on these local, popular festivals. The fact that foreign culture has an influence is beyond question. What García Canclini seeks is to see how the relationship works between the two cultures. He describes the traditional festival as, “una puesta en escena: de las fisuras entre campo y ciudad, entre lo indígena y lo occidental, sus interacciones y conflictos. Lo comprobamos en la coexistencia de danzas antiguas y conjuntos de rock, en centenarios de ofrendas mortuorias indígenas fotografiadas por centenarios de cámaras . . .” (“Fiestas populares” 40). This stage where city and country, indigenous and Western, popular and mass culture coexist is one which certainly contains the spirit of hybridization that García Canclini describes in Culturas híbridas. It also contains the possibility for domination and dominator, but also for resistance. In looking at three specific festivals, García Canclini finds various ranges of reaction to outside influence.

In one festival, “usan botellas de Coca Cola para llevar los cirios, o simplemente empuñan las botellas como acto devoto, el uso de popotes y vasos representa el papel que tienen los refrescos comerciales en un pueblo donde el agua se recoge en dos lugares, y en varias épocas del año no alcanza ni para tomar” (“Fiestas populares” 46). In this situation, one can see how foreign culture and especially foreign capitalist ideology in the form of Coca Cola bottles has made its way into local, traditional practices. The prominent position of Coca Cola leaves no doubt about the integration or the product has into the community. Another aspect to this festival, however, is that “[s]egún el
sacerdote de Patamban, la fiesta fue creada hace quince o veinte años por un cura anterior con el fin de atraer visitantes y promover la venta de artesanías” (“Fiestas populares” 45). This community reaffirms the capitalist ideal that shows up in Coca Cola, but does so in a way that also capitalizes on their traditions and indigenous heritage. The community uses the stereotype (or mass culture image) of an indigenous community to attract tourists and gain an economic benefit from them.

In talking about an even more tourist centered celebration in Janitzio, García Canclini explains how the inhabitants of the town pose for pictures and videos, of course for economic remuneration. They play up to the mass culture vision of the indigenous festival, wearing traditional dress and processing to the cemetery for traditional Day of the Dead practices, which have been transmitted via the culture industry throughout the nation and even throughout the world. It is these mass media perpetuated images and stereotypes that bring the tourist to the community to witness a traditional culture, and to spend a good deal of money. Through the tourist trade, these communities make use of the mass culture vision in order to benefit from it, although they do not completely do away with the dichotomy of dominated and dominator. For one thing, it is obvious that these communities have fully embraced the capitalist ideal of the free market. García Canclini states that, “por causas económicas, políticas o ideológicas la cultura dominante preserva bolsones arcaicos refuncionalizándolos y recontextualizándolos” (“Fiestas populares” 51). Ironically, the mass culture vision of these traditional festivals and the communities that embrace such a vision for their economic gain help preserve the traditional practices that seem to be in danger due to the foreign, capitalist invasion. The
problem lies in how far down the road of commercialization the community goes, that is, how far they allow themselves to be dominated as an object of interest for the tourist.

García Canclini concludes by stating that it is possible to maintain one’s social identity and still benefit from these festivals: “si el pueblo logra controlar que la expansión, el goce y el gasto se realicen dentro de marcos internos, o al menos no sean subordinados a los intereses del gran capital comercial” (“Fiestas populares” 51). In the context of the cultural imperialism argument, one could conclude that such “domination” is not possible as long as the consumer does not completely subsume his / her cultural practices (in this case the local fiesta) to the capitalist / economic gain to be had from the consumption of foreign culture. It is possible to make use of the foreign culture industry for one’s own purposes.

García Canclini’s contribution to the mass culture debate is not just his discussion of the hybridization of culture and a refutation of cultural imperialism, but goes one step further in Consumers and Citizens. García Canclini in this book shifts the paradigm of mass culture (one of ignorant consumer and product) to one with more active participation of the consumer. This approach seemingly negates the idea of mass culture as domination, but as will be shown, García Canclini combines the idea of mass culture as domination as well as resistance. To begin with, García Canclini argues that, “consumption is good for thinking” (Consumers 37). He sees consumer culture as one that provides the consumer with a choice, which in turn gives him/her an invested interest in the active participation in this consumption. As García Canclini puts it, “[s]ome consumers want to be citizens” (Consumers 47). His basic argument is that changes in globalization and the postmodern condition have made the consolidation of national
identities problematic, and the basic functions of concepts such as citizen and consumer have also changed. He argues that “[t]he relations between citizens and consumers has been altered throughout the world due to economic, technological, and cultural changes that have impeded the constitution of identities through national symbols” (Consumers 5). National identity in crisis leads to a different kind of citizenship, not a regional or national citizenship, but rather a local yet global citizenship. The very idea of identity has changed, and so while modern identities were basically aligned geographically and were monolingual, “postmodern identities are transterritorial and multilingual. They are structured less by the logic of the state than by that of markets” (Consumers 29). The market bears the brunt of the burden for identity construction and one of the major reasons for this breakdown of national citizenship is the increasing globalization of commodities.

What is citizenship, then, if traditional concepts of national identity have given way to new forms? García Canclini theorizes that
citizenship is seen not only in relation to rights accorded by state institutions to those born within their territorial jurisdiction, but also as social and cultural practices that confer a sense of belonging, provide a sense of difference, and enable the satisfaction of the needs of those who possess a given language and organize themselves in certain ways. (Consumers 20)

According to García Canclini, citizenship is not simply a geopolitical designation; but a vested interest in and sense of connection to the group of which one is a citizen. This concept of citizenship is a much more active process of interpretation and mediation than the traditional concept of citizenship that is tied to birthplace or place of residence.
If citizenship is considered an active process, then consumption comes into play. To be a good citizen, one must also be a conscientious consumer. The idea of the nation is altered as well: “[t]he definition of a nation, for example, is given less at this stage by its territorial limits or its political history. It survives, rather, as an interpretive community of consumers, whose traditional –alimentary, linguistic- habits induce them to relate in a peculiar way with the objects and information that circulate in international networks” ([Consumers] 43). The nation, rather than being a political entity, is an economic one. This process is in large part due to the growing political apathy among the postmodern citizen. Seen from a different point of view, one could also say that the political process becomes an economic process as well. It is this idea that prompts García Canclini to state that “[t]o consume is to participate in an arena of competing claims for what society produces and the ways of using it” ([Consumers] 39). These competing claims do not take into account strict national or transnational boundaries. It becomes somewhat problematic for national identity if the culture consumed by citizens is predominately foreign, hence the crisis of national identity.

Combined with this vision of the consumer culture, García Canclini also argues that because of the high impact of mass media and mass culture, the national government should be more invested in these sectors. As such, “the city can be said to exist more for the government and the press than for its citizens” ([Consumers] 56). Canclini warns against theories and policies that assume the homogeneity of consumers (both of popular as well as of high culture). He advocates, instead, policies that are multifaceted and that focus on a recognition of the heterogeneity of the consumer. He states in his “policies for citizenship” that, “[p]erhaps the point of departure for urban policies should not be to
think of heterogeneity as a problem, but rather as the point of departure for a democratic plurality” (Consumers 75). For García Canclini, cultural differences should be celebrated, not shunned, and his proposed “policies” reflect this. He talks of the need to respond to the diversity of the population and specifically includes the culture industry as a part of this approach. In fact, “[t]he culture industries today are the principal means of enabling reciprocal knowledge and cohesion among the segmented organizations and groups of large cities. […] Citizenship is no longer constituted solely in relation to local social movements, but also through the communicative processes of the mass media” (Consumers 76). García Canclini advocates the use of the culture industry for the construction of local identities. In fact, the culture industry seems to be one of the few instruments of communication that is capable of helping to connect the disparate citizens of the megapolis. Television, radio, film, etc. all have the ability to reinforce national and local citizenship, but they also have the inverse power of tearing down identity. It is for this reason that García Canclini supports governmental intervention in the culture industry, to help guide the medium for the benefit of both what he calls citizenship and the creation of a sovereign identity. He states that,

it is also the responsibility of public institutions to develop programs to facilitate reciprocal information and knowledge in culture industries that provide mass communication – radio, TV, film, video, and interactive electronic systems – to different peoples and subgroups within each society. We need policies to promote the formation of a Latin American audiovisual space. (Consumers 132)
These policies would help to confront the increasing dissolution of the national and regional identity through the reinforcing of internal, local culture in a way that the current focus on high culture cannot hope to equal.

The irony of this argument is that García Canclini seeks to replace a foreign culture industry which affects the national / regional identity with a similar regional culture industry. Even though he claims that cultural imperialism no longer matters, his argument flirts with the idea. The need for government intervention in the culture industry assumes that the foreign culture industry is working as a force of domination in that it enables the dissolution of national boundaries and identity. What García Canclini proposes, then, is to supplant a foreign force of domination with a regional one without giving up the dominating identity of the culture industry. It simply becomes an acceptable form of domination; a regional mass culture will reintroduce the national identity that is missing in the foreign mode of domination.

García Canclini, with his focus on the idea of a cultural hybridity, and with his recognition of the possible dominating force of mass culture, is a good example of the very complexity of the issue of mass culture in society. From the inception of the mass culture phenomenon and the first theorists, like Adorno and Benjamin, mass culture has fostered two contrasting evaluations. Some see culture as a threat to individuality or a force of domination and social control for the impressionable masses. Others see mass culture as a force of resistance to traditional categories and social structures.

In light of the complex and often contradictory debate over culture, mass culture, the media, modernity and postmodernity in the Latin American context, it seems fitting to conclude by looking at the work of Santiago Colás. He talks of the “need to negotiate the
tension between the tenuous conceptual validity of ‘Latin America’ and the concrete
particular case of Argentina” (19) and concludes that while there might be such a thing as
Latin American modernity, there is no clear Latin American postmodernity and so, “we
must, for the moment, speak only an Argentine or Brazilian or Nicaraguan
postmodernity” (19). The same can be said of a study of Latin American mass culture.
While there are certainly trends and similarities, like the idea of mass culture as
resistance or mass culture as domination, the interplay of foreign and domestic mass
culture varies greatly from country to country, and even from region to region. And so, I
find myself in much the same dilemma as Colás, how to examine the idea of mass culture
in Latin American fiction in a credible, non essentialist, reductionist manner.

In an attempt to resolve this tension between the general and the specific, I take as
a basis the two centers of cultural production, both in terms of high and mass culture,
from the developing period of Latin America, Mexico and Argentina, as a point of
departure. As discussed earlier, both Mexico and Argentina had very successful culture
industries that competed effectively against foreign, largely North American, cultural
importation. It is significant that Mexico and Argentina are also two countries that house
major editorial industries. As such, both countries are positioned uniquely for an
examination of this topic in a specific and relevant way. In order to further emphasize
the connection between countries and the treatment of mass culture, I have chosen writers
from the earlier period to whom the current generation of writers, like Bolaño, Fresán and
Fuguet, have acknowledged a certain debt. In one way or another, all of these writers
find themselves somewhere in the spectrum between resistance and domination with
regards to mass culture; what remains to be seen is how the mass culture paradigm of
domination and resistance plays out in the specific contexts of the writers involved in this study.

1 The connection between Mexico and the Southern Cone is emphasized in the later authors as well given the fact that several of them, most notably Fresán, have lived in Mexico D.F. and their works include Mexico as a backdrop. It is also pertinent to recognize that Puig lived in exile in Mexico from 1973 to the end of his life in 1990. In addition to this, both Fresán and Fuguet relate the importance of Puig for their work. Critics like Edmundo Paz Soldán, Kelly Hargrave and Georgia Seminet have compared Fuguet and Fresán to both the Onda writers and Puig. I will explore this connection more in Chapter 4.

2 See, for example, Colás (ix-xi).

3 Recognizing that this cultural stratification, of necessity, generally follows economic trends as well.

4 Bourdieu goes on to describe three types of cultural capital: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. The embodied state deals with the capital that the individual possesses. This embodied state of cultural capital is affected by factors of education (both formal and informal) and economic status. In order to accumulate the embodied state of cultural capital, the individual must have time free from economic worries in order to give him/her the chance to build cultural capital. The second type of cultural capital, the objectified state, deals more with the artifacts of culture, although it is still intimately tied to the embodied state. It is also tied to some extent to economic capital. As Bourdieu comments, “cultural goods can be appropriated both materially—which presupposes economic capital—and symbolically—which presupposes cultural capital” (“Forms” 50). For example, a painting by Diego Rivera holds both economic capital, his works sell for millions, as well as cultural capital. It takes the embodied state of cultural capital, the ability accumulated over time to appropriately “consume” the work of art, to appreciate its objectified cultural capital, the cultural value we place on the object. The final stage of cultural capital is the institutionalized state. This refers to the role that education and academics make in the sphere of culture. The academic environment also objectifies individuals, giving them added weight and neutralizing in many ways biological constraints. Bourdieu explains that,

This objectification is what makes the difference between the capital of the autodidact, which may be called into question at any time, or even the cultural capital of the courier, which can yield only ill-defined profits, of fluctuating value, in the market of high-society exchanges, and in the cultural capital academically sanctioned by legally guaranteed qualifications, formally independent of the person of their bearer. (“Forms” 50)

In other words, the opinion of the educated individual, regardless of other factors, is going to have more weight in terms of the cultural capital that it holds, than that of the
lower, less educated or self educated individual, even if the opinion that is held is the very same. The academic title itself gives authority to the individual, thus validating their cultural opinion. The educated individual is the one who can determine what has artistic value and what is material simply for the masses; in this way, works of “high” art become entrenched in the sphere of cultural elitism.

5 Martín Barbero notes that, “[t]he theories of John Stuart Mill in the second half of the nineteenth century continued and complimented the thought of de Tocqueville, albeit in a less belligerently political and more philosophical mode” (26). He goes on to say that Mill shifts the idea of the masses from a negative one to “the image of a vast and scattered aggregation of isolated individuals” (26).

6 In this, as Martín Barbero acknowledges, Freud is also following the work of Gustave Le Bon, who published the very first “scientific” study of the crowd.

7 What this perspective leaves out, however, is the importance of the existent systems of power; that is, they tend towards idealism. Martín Barbero states that, “their cultural analysis is cut off from an analysis of the relations of power. This is the result of a conception of culture that, although an improvement on the aristocratic idealism of the past, continues to be tied to the liberal idealism that separates culture and work into the two unrelated spaces of ‘pleasure’ and ‘necessity’” (37).

8 The inclusion of Bourdieu is doubly important, as he proves to be a very influential thinker for Latin Americans critics, figuring largely in the works of critics like Néstor García Canclini, Beatriz Sarlo and Jesús Martín-Barbero.

9 It is also important to note that education has as much weight in this equation as social status does. One can be of a higher social status, but with less education and the tendency would be toward a form of cultural production that is lower down in what Bourdieu calls the aristocracy of culture, while at the same time a consumer from a lower social class, but with a much higher education, like a university professor for example, might favor a form of culture that is higher on the scale.

It is equally important to recognize that the aristocracy of culture does not work like a formula, i.e. Mr. Smith is a well educated member of the upper class and so must like the types of culture found in this scale (opera, modern painting, etc.). There are many variables that determine taste that are not limited to just social status and education. What is significant with Bourdieu’s study is that education and social status are a factor in and can make a difference in the type of cultural capital that an individual has.

10 I examine Benjamin’s essay in greater detail later on.

11 García Canclini goes on to investigate the ways in which both popular and high culture make use of the other, as will be discussed later.

12 García Canclini argues for government involvement in popular culture. He believes that besides giving support to high culture, the government needs to promote regional mass culture because that is the area where most citizens are more fully engaged. The “typical” citizen is more likely to watch television or listen to the radio than he / she is to attend an evening of dance or opera (Consumers 52-53).

13 Many critics include Walter Benjamin in the Frankfurt School, but given the difference found in his theories regarding mass culture, I chose to separate him from the other critics.
These and other demographic figures on Mexico City mentioned later in this chapter come from García Canclini (Consumers 81).

He goes on to note that the majority of these publishing houses fail in the 70s and are subsequently sold to Spanish and then other companies. This can be seen as an early manifestation of the globalization that will affect Latin America starting in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

García Canclini explains that in the majority of Latin American countries literacy rates rise to between 85% and 90% from 1950 to 1970. He also states that university enrollment rises from 250,000 to 380,000 in the same time period. (Culturashíbridas 81-82).

Martín Barbero also summarizes the development of Argentine radio dramas, from a focus on popular / folk traditions like song and dance, to the emergence of popular myths and figures like the gauchos to a diversification of themes, similar to what happens in Mexican film, in the 1940’s with the important inclusion of the detective story and children’s stories (170-171).

Beatriz Sarlo explores the intellectual / artistic aspects of this peripheral modernity in her book Una modernidad periférica. Sarlo also recognizes the importance of mass culture, specifically the daily newspaper and magazine circulation, in her argument.

Pasquali refers to the case of the newspaper El Nacional in 1961, which was brought to the brink of collapse by North American companies who pulled their advertising after the newspaper failed to take an anti-Castro attitude (112).

Once again, the work of Pasquali is very similar to that of García Canclini in another time period and another geographical region. Canclini, at the end of his book Consumers and Citizens proposes that the government be involved in supporting Latin American mass culture and gives a series of “policies” which will be discussed further in this chapter (132).

Current projections put the population of Mexico City at around 22.5 million (García Canclini Consumers 52).

Although this date is certainly debatable.

The very semantics of the issue signal the prestige of high art, which is art, and mass culture, which cannot be art, but rather uses the more ambiguous term culture.

Indeed, the idea of the ecstatic state of the masses finds a parallel in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book Empire. In this book, they expound a theory of the multitude as a force opposed to empire. The multitude, in contrast to the homogenous idea of “people”, is a heterogeneous social force that, “is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relationship to those outside of it” (103). They add that, “[t]he desires of the multitude and its antagonism to every form of domination drive it to divest itself once again of the processes of legitimation that support the sovereign power” (90). The multitude for Hardt and Negri is a force that continually rejects domination, that works as a force of resistance. They state that, “[t]he movements of the multitude have to be allowed to expand always wider across the world scene, and the attempts at repressing the multitude are really paradoxical, inverted manifestations of
its strength” (399). The multitude for these theorists, like the masses for Baudrillard and many other theorists, is a true force in the paradigm of power and its strength manifests itself in the levels to which, “Empire” will go to try to dominate them. A portion of this domination comes through the use of mass culture.

In this case, we use “modernist” as generally accepted in the North American academy as opposed to the Latin American modernism that includes José Martí and Rubén Darío. In this sense, “modernist” can be seen as the experimentation with form and style, such as stream of consciousness, etc. that is related in the more global sense to the works of Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Faulkner and others.

For a more complete examination of postmodernism and Latin America see Latin American Postmodernisms, Ed. Richard A. Young; On Edge, Eds. George Yúdice, Jean Franco and Juan Flores; Martin Hopenhayn, No Apocalypse, No Integration; Santiago Colás, Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm; the special edition of Boundary 2 dedicated to Latin American postmodernity (20.3); or the collection of essays The Postmodern in Latin and Latino American Cultural Narratives, Ed. Claudia Ferman.

This is also paralleled by the change from intellectual to expert that was discussed earlier.

Although the major impetus of García Canclini’s work is promoting a vision of unstable categories of culture that coexist and mutually interconnect, he in fact sees the destabilization of cultural categories as a positive thing. He also recognizes the need by many to maintain the rigid societal groupings. The need to distinguish between social classes is ever present, and will always find a way of manifesting itself, in that “[h]ay sectores de élite y populares que restablecen la especificidad de sus patrimonios o buscan nuevos signos para diferenciarse” (Culturas híbridas 331).

García Canclini gives the example of Brazil, where the percentage of local film being shown in the theaters rose from 13.9% in 1971 to 35% in 1982 (Culturas híbridas 289). Also pertinent to this idea is the gain of Mexican films in the North American market, where films like Amores perros or Y tu mamá también have done remarkably well. In addition, actors from Latin America, like Gael García Bernal, and some directors, like Alejandro González Iñárritu (the director of Amores perros), have crossed over to Hollywood filmmaking. In his argument, García Canclini also mentions the effects of the Latino culture in the United States, with its subsequent production in the Spanish language. He states that the increasing market for Spanish language mass culture in the US, “se debe a que la llamada cultura latina produce películas como Zoot suit y La bamba, las canciones de Rubén Blades y Los Lobos, teatros de avanzada estética y cultural como el de Luis Valdez, artistas plásticos cuya calidad y aptitud para hacer interactuar la cultura popular con la simbólica moderna y posmoderna los incorpora al mainstream norteamericano” (Culturas híbridas 291).

Colás resolves this tension by suggesting that the “Argentine paradigm” is one way of confronting postmodernism that is specific to Argentina, but that can also have a relationship with other forms of the postmodern condition. In much the same way, I suggest that mass culture seen through the Onda, Puig, Fuguet and Fresan is simply one
paradigm that occurs within a specific context, but that also can have a positive relation with other contexts.
Chapter 2

Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll: The Mexican Onda

Estamos parados entre la Revolución y la Televisión. (187-188)

-- Huberto Heggo in Lapsus by Héctor Manjárrez

The 1960s worldwide can be seen as a decade characteristic of the tensions between domination and resistance in many different ways. From the Vietnam War and the paranoia of the Cold War combined with anti-colonial sentiments to the hippy movements of the end of the decade, the 60s are known for many as a decade of change, controversy, and above all youth. Worldwide, young people from the US, France, and Mexico formed a new counterculture movement that characterized the decade, with its insistence on fighting the Establishment and righting the wrongs of society. While a specific beginning of the counterculture in Mexico might be harder to determine, the height of the Mexican movement comes in 1968 with the student demonstrations and subsequent massacre at Tlateloco, while 1971 with the Avándaro rock festival signals its death warrant. As the Avándaro festival, as well as the King Creole riot of 1959 and other similar events demonstrate, rock and roll and other products of the American culture industry are not just an aesthetic preoccupation in Mexico context, but also become a social one. Rock and roll, in fact, contains the very paradoxes involved in the idea of high and low culture and in the discourse of cultural imperialism. This fact is not lost on the Mexican writers of this generation, like Carlos Monsiváis, José Agustín,
Gustavo Saíz, Parménides García Saldaña and Héctor Manjárez among others. These writers include North American mass culture and rock music within their works both as a thematic element which allows the author / narrator to explore issues of youth resistance and identity in contrast with a mainstream culture, as well as a narrative technique which employs a fragmented style of narration. These texts in many cases contain a criticism of the very counterculture they portray. It should be noted that even though these authors use mass culture as a way to explore resistance, they do not completely reject the idea of the potential for domination of the culture industry.

Partly due to greater accessibility of mass culture, through the increase of radio stations and the introduction of television, and partly through the physical and economic proximity of the United States, North American mass culture finds easy access to the Mexican market, bringing with it the rock and roll culture of the 50’s and 60’s. Before looking at the background of rock music in Mexico, it is helpful to note that, while it is not the only defining characteristic of the generation of young writers that become known as the Onda, rock music certainly plays an important role for many of them in their artistic expression. Rock becomes more than just an aesthetic style, it is a way of life.

As any subculture, the Onderos form their own norms: long hair, drugs and alcohol, jargon and rock music. Rock music becomes their anthem, the soundtrack and the outward manifestation of the Ondero; that is, the Ondero listens to rock music because he is Ondero. Onda also means a disconnect from society and social rejection of the individual. As Parménides García Saldaña puts it, “[l]os agitadores de la onda son adolescentes y jóvenes menores de treinta años. Ellos son vilipendiados, injuriados, despreciados por la sociedad que desde las posiciones de ‘el progreso’ y ‘la justicia
social’ no puede explicarse su existencia en México” (En la ruta 50). Onda by some is considered counterculture in all of its various manifestations, from the drug subculture to the rock subculture.

The term Onda is complicated one because it means different things to different people. It originally comes from the rock and roll counterculture but was later appropriated by literary critic Margo Glantz to refer to a group of writers who explore this counterculture in their works. Using the term “Onda” can be especially confusing when talking about these writers, since many of them, like Monsivais and García Saldaña, use the term “Onda” in a much broader way to refer to the rebellious anti-establishment counterculture ethos that encompasses rock and roll.

Writers like José Agustín, Gustavo Sainz, Parménides García Saldaña, Héctor Manjarrez and many others provide a literary parallel to what was happening in the musical and social counterculture movements of the 60s and 70s. Their literature has young protagonists and is written from the perspective of youth. The Onda writers are themselves young. Martha Paley Francescato explains that “la Onda surge en México por la necesidad que sienten los jóvenes de escribir, de imponerse, como reacción a grupos ‘opresores’, a una ‘mafia’ que dominaba los puestos de poder en México” (296). They are young writers who need to rebel against the Establishment in order to express themselves. They embrace rock music and drugs, devalue parental authority, and also became the target of criticism. Reinhard Teichman defines the Onda as, “unos pocos jóvenes que se pusieron a escribir sobre lo suyo en su propio lenguaje y de manera más o menos casual” (14). While the fact that these are young writers is certainly important, it is equally important to take into account the imagined reader of the Onda narratives.
Rosario Castellanos argues that the Onda literature, “por primera vez les da a los chavos un material de lectura muy accesible y muy inmediato y por lo tanto empieza a generarse un Nuevo público lector” (176). Not only are the Onda writers participants in the youth culture, their audience is specifically Mexican youth. In contrast to the narratives of Fuentes and other authors, the Onda writers create narratives that engage a young audience. These young writers disdain the more “high” culture Boom writing, which received international recognition for their all-encompassing narratives and modern narrative techniques. Although Onda texts include modern literary techniques found in the Boom narratives like a changing perspective, multiple narrators, etc., their narratives also provide a space to explore resistance to the Establishment, whether it be a literary / cultural Establishment or a national / political one. While recognizing the artificial distinction between the wider counterculture tendency that these writers speak about and their own narrative, I will use the term “Onda” to refer specifically to the authors who are exploring the systems of establishment and resistance and the term counterculture to refer to the wider social and political form of resistance.

Margo Glantz popularized the term “Onda” to refer to this group of young writers who embraced rock and roll culture in their artistic expression in her introduction to Onda y escritura en México: jóvenes de 20 a 33. She begins this introduction by decrying that “[e]n la década que terminamos, es decir en la que va de 1960 a 1970, los hijos y los padres ya viven sin reconocerse, la multiplicación se ejerce y nuestra literatura edifica la última terraza de la Torre de Babel” (5). The state of Mexican literature according to Glantz is one of incomprehension between two competing literary philosophies: “onda” and “escritura”; that is Onda and Literary Writing or High Culture. As she excludes
Onda texts from Escritura, she solidifies, perhaps too hastily, the strict separation between high and low culture. In this introduction, Glantz argues that Escritura is manifested in the fact that “la narrativa mexicana se enriquece cada año con mayor número de autores que van depurando, ensayando y agotando muchos tipos de narrativas, creando estilos, estableciendo una competencia, produciendo lo que Carpentier llama una novelística” (6). Escritura for Glantz describes narrative experimentation, sometimes to the point of absurdity, which exemplifies the intellectual trend of novels. These novels, following the groundbreaking work of the *nouveau roman* tradition of Robbe Grillet and others, subordinate plot to the language act. Escritura is the subversion of literary/narrative tradition. Glantz goes on to describe Escritura as the preocupación por escribir “escritura”, por destruir la forma tradicional de la narrativa, por pisotear el templo, acaba volviéndose primordial y cada autor la contempla desde su ángulo, cumpliendo con mayor o menor fortuna ese imperativo categórico que les viene desde Europa, desde América Latina, desde el propio México. La técnica suele exagerarse y se llega al extremo de utilizar el lenguaje con afanes filológicos. (35)

Escribir, for Glantz, should push narrative to its very limits, should explore language to its utmost, and should revel in this experimentation.

On the other side lies Onda, which Glantz chastises for a lack of narrative innovation, although she does concede its ability to represent the new youth culture. Glantz suggests that Onda, “no aparta la experiencia para indagar en su contexto, intenta confundirse en ella y entregánsela en el nivel de la sensación inmediata” (21). Instead of commenting on the culture or society, Onda narration exists both within and outside of
the Onda culture, thus maintaining the ability to logically examine the culture itself. Onda writers offer the experience of being in this culture. For Glantz, Onda provides a social critique while Escritura constitutes verbal creation. The potential flaw in this approach is that the two ideas are mutually exclusive. For Glantz, Onda cannot be Escritura. She states, “‘escritura’ negaría Onda. La negaría en la medida en que el lenguaje de la Onda es el instrumento para observar un mundo y no la materia misma de su narrativa. Onda significaría en última instancia otro realismo, un testimonio, no una impugnación, aunque algunas novelas o narraciones de la Onda empiecen a cuestionar su testimonio” (32-33). What Glantz cannot get beyond is the seemingly simplistic narration of the Onda writers and their interest in the youth counterculture. This insistence upon the simple and the youthful in the Onda writers does not factor in the multiple variations produced by the different writers in their works.

As Glanz points out, the works of Agustín, Sainz, García Saldaña, Manjarrez and others certainly share some common themes and stylistic traits, and in several cases these authors even maintain strong friendships. However, the idea that many critics have of an Onda movement can be misleading. José Agustín argues vociferously against the title of Onda. He argues that the tendencies found in his own and others’ works are not the result of a conscious aesthetic vision, but rather are the product of their time. In many cases, the authors associated with Onda have more differences than they do similarities. Agustín states that “[n]o se trataba de un movimiento literario articulado y coordinado como los estridentistas, surrealistas, existencialistas, beats, o nadaístas [. . .] Compartíamos, eso sí, un espíritu generacional, por lo cual los primeros lectores entusiastas eran jóvenes de nuestra edad . . .” (“Onda” 13-14). The fact remains that this
group of authors, whether they agree or not, has been condensed into a category, called the Onda. Whether this is positive or not, there is a certain validity to examining these authors together: through their use of mass and youth culture and their stylistic and structural experimentation they share common aesthetic traits. It is a fact that Agustín concedes in the end, bowing to literary convention by saying, “por mi parte, tolero y me resigno cuando hablan de ‘la Onda’ ” (“Onda” 17). One must be very careful not to lump these authors together as a homogenous movement, but rather to recognize and comment on their similarities as well as their differences.

Criticism contemporary with Glantz’s essay tends to corroborate her conclusions, whether it condemns or lauds the Onda. Most criticism has focused on the Onda writer’s use of language, rock and roll, and its antiestablishment tone. For some critics, Onda writing offers the novelty of young writers writing about youth experiences but is primarily a curiosity. For example, Walter Langford, in his 1971 study The Mexican Novel Comes of Age, dedicates entire chapters to canonical literary figures like Mariano Azuela, Agustín Yáñez, Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes, but includes the Onda in the chapter titled, “And a Dozen More.” In that chapter he mentions Agustín and Sainz along with writers that Glantz includes in her category of Escritura, like Salvador Elizondo and Jorge Ibargüengoitia. Even J. Ann Duncan’s 1986 book, Voices, Visions, and a New Reality, reinforces Glantz’s stereotype, stating that “the much talked-of movement of the 1960’s, led by Sainz and Agustín . . . aimed at the rejection of all seriousness, pomposity, and overt intellectuality” (23). Onda writing for these critics represents the idea of immature, playful or anti-intellectual / experimentation. Onda writers intentionally included mass culture within their production, but also intended to
produce “high” literature of the type that Glantz might include in her “Ecritura” category.

Other critics, like John S. Brushwood, tend to focus on language and social critique in Onda texts. Brushwood states that “[c]ualquier novela de la ‘onda’, por supuesto, comunica explícitamente una crítica a la sociedad, escenificada siempre en la ciudad de México” (Novela mexicana 80). More recently, there has also been much attention given to the changes that Onda writers have evidenced in their development as writers as well as to the position of Onda writers within the broader postmodern tendencies. While these are intriguing concerns, concise, methodic exploration of the function of mass culture in Onda novels is absent from the corpus of criticism.

Many contemporary and current critics accent the dichotomy set forth by Glantz, seeing the Onda as a trend which is connected to North American rock music and the youth counterculture, and therefore a less prestigious form of artistic expression. The insight of Danny Anderson explains how these texts became branded as Onda works, and thus cannot be seen as breaking out of the form in which criticism has labeled them. Anderson examines the formation of the influential publishing company Joaquin Mortiz and finds that the company acquires symbolic capital through an intentional connection with recognized authors and a deliberate intent to publish “cultural” and “literary” texts. In looking at reader reviews of texts, Anderson finds the perception of many texts as simply imitating the pattern of narrative innovation in order to sell. Anderson explains that, “[j]ust as the onda style was often perceived as obstructing originality, numerous reports complained about poorly digested renderings of the French nouveau roman in many manuscripts written in escritura style” (23). This highlights the desire by many
authors to be a part of the Mexican literary world, through either of the styles that Glantz identified: Onda or Escritura. It also highlights the fact that not all texts were able to pass the test of literary competence (according to the reviewers of the manuscripts at Joaquin Mortiz); that is, not all Onda texts are equal, nor do all texts created in this style lend themselves to literary study. Because of this desire to form a part of the trend, and the proliferation of such texts, many critics reduce the Onda to a simplistic formula of youth writing about drugs and rock and roll. Just as Joaquín Mortiz acquires a certain prestigious cultural or symbolic capital, the Onda does so in a different (and perhaps contrary) way. In the context of my discussion of the Onda, Anderson’s work helps show that the Onda is not a uniform, cohesive trend, but rather a richer, more nuanced one deserving greater critical attention.

Keeping the idea of mass culture in mind, it is possible to arrive at a set of broad conclusions regarding the Onda that questions this perception. The Onda literature does not completely accept mass culture, but at times accepts it and at times rejects it. In addition, Onda authors do not just utilize rock and roll; they examine all North American mass culture as a way of showing social status rather than simply counterculture. Finally, the Onda authors use North American mass culture, not with to create texts of mass or popular culture, but to produce “high” culture texts that simply present the new urban youth culture.

Before looking at the Onda works and how they use North American mass culture as a factor in their aesthetic creation, it is helpful to examine their historical and social background. It also helps to go back to the Mexican Revolution to understand the implications of rock music and the counterculture movement for the nation. The
Mexican Revolution, although certainly not a coherent event with a common ideological makeup, ultimately coalesced around land and labor reform as well as a discourse of modernization. It these ideals of the revolution which Lázaro Cárdenas sought to implement during his presidency. The significant part of the Mexican Revolution for the counterculture, however, is not necessarily its ideological / political implications, but rather its importance in the nation building processes of the PRI. In post-Revolution history, the Partido Revolucionario Institucionalizado (PRI) is a direct consequence of the system of presidential succession, from Plutarcho Elías Calles through the puppet governments of Portes Gil, Ortiz Rubio and Rodriguez to Lázaro Cardenas and then to the presidencies that coincide with the Onda: Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Adolfo López Mateos, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and Luis Echeverría. It is also important to note that, although the various presidents all publicly support the ideas and consequences of the Revolution, they put this into practice in many different ways. As a consequence, the PRI appropriates the symbolism of the Revolution to perpetuate the idea of nationhood. For the PRI, Mexican culture is whatever is tied to Mexico itself; it is Emiliano Zapata, the serpent and the eagle, the Virgen de Guadalupe, etc., all couched in terms of a revolutionary and “new” Mexico. The introduction of foreign (rock and roll) culture is a threat to the autochthonous nature of “Mexican culture.” Additionally, the revolutionary discourse of the PRI supports the modernization of the nation. Revolutionary symbols and images are used to reinforce the modernizing projects of the government. The counterculture comes to symbolize those factors that work to subvert or replace the idea of “Mexican Culture” with alternatives, like the rock and drug subculture. On the one hand, the culture industry plays a large role in spreading a countercultural ideology.
The government used Mexican mass culture to foster a sense on national identity. As Eric Zolov explains, “through its direct and indirect control over the mass media the PRI manipulated a discourse that combined a revolutionary ideology with the promise of modernity, all aimed at sustaining a middle-class consensus and thus preventing any direct questioning of the PRI’s authoritarian politics” (7). Mexican mass culture was used to promote the authoritarian rule of the PRI by insisting on the benefit of modernization. It reinforced the idea that modernization would not be possible without the PRI. The situation that Zolov describes is reminiscent of the situation that Adorno and Horkheimer warn against the use of mass culture by governmental forces to dominate the masses. It certainly plays a large role in the construction of a common national identity.

Carlos Monsiváis, one of the intellectuals most closely associated with the Onda, breaks mass culture in Mexico into three distinct stages, all of which have a marked relationship with government and the official nation building ideology. The first stage, from 1910 to 1930 is as a precursor to the mass culture disseminated by radio and television. It consists of popular theater and songs as well as folk art, and provides a pattern for later mass culture communicated by radio and television shows. In the first stage, during the Revolution itself, Mexican popular culture is used to present national myths. The second stage, which coincides with the introduction of radio in the country around 1930, is described by Monsiváis as “una etapa fecunda de la cultura popular urbana, principio hegemónico de la industria cultural” (“Cultura popular” 112). This stage is characterized by an upsurge in the overt use of mass culture to foster a sense of nationhood; it is in this moment when the culture industry begins to take over, especially
in the urban context, from the folk and popular songs prevalent earlier. Monsiváis argues that, “[l]o ‘mexicano’ (Lo nuestro) corre a cuenta ya no de acciones políticas sino de canciones, radio, cine y teatro de revistas” (“Cultura popular” 113). It is also in this stage that Mexican film experiences its golden age, with actors like Pedro Infante or María Félix and directors like Emilio Fernandez bringing Mexican cinema throughout Latin America. The last stage that Monsiváis talks about is the period that begins with the introduction of television, in 1950. He calls this stage a cultural North Americanization. During this time period North American mass culture begins to “invade” the Mexican culture industries, either directly through Hollywood produced shows or music, or indirectly through the imitation of what is popular in the US. Monsiváis equates this cultural influence with cultural imperialism to such a point that, as he states, “Batman y Robin sustityen a Hidalgo y Morelos” (“Cultura popular” 118).

Rock and roll exemplified the contradictions in the high culture / low culture as well as the cultural imperialism paradigms. Rock and roll via its iconic bad boys like Marlon Brando or James Dean, or its hypersexual dance icons like Elvis Presley, was perceived as a threat to the mainstream culture in the United States, but it was less controversial initially in Mexico. For many Mexicans, the consumption of North American rock music and culture was a symbol of social affluence and sophistication rather than rebellion.

In reality, one could divide the rock and roll phenomenon in Mexico into two stages. In the first stage, North American rock and roll culture was a symbol of social class and upward mobility in Mexico. Those who consumed rock and roll were the children of the wealthy and middle classes. In this stage, rock and roll became closely
linked with modernization, with both positive and negative connotations. As Zolov explains;

"Many Mexicans viewed the rise of rock 'n' roll as an imperialist import from the United States, a reaction similar to that in other societies around the world. But clearly the issue was more complicated. On one hand, rock 'n' roll was associated with challenges to parental authority and wanton individualism. On the other hand, however, the new youth culture also appealed to many adults' perceptions of what it meant to be modern, to have access to global culture." (8)

The very presence of rock and roll music (both from the United States and the native rock movement that will be discussed later) was heralded by many as a double edged blade: while it opens the door to modernization, rock ‘n’ roll also had the potential to foster youth rebellion and undermine the project of a national culture.

Despite the desire of the culture industry and the government, the attraction of the James Dean / Marlon Brando rebel without a cause figure was highly attractive for many Mexican youth. Although never a widespread phenomenon, the rebels without a cause were certainly a very visable minority. As José Agustín explains, “los chavos de la clase media mexicana empezaron a establecer señas de identidad: cola de caballo, faldas amplias, crinolinas, calcetas blancas, copete, patillas, cola de pato, pantalones de mezclilla, el cuello de la camisa con la parte trasera alzada. Y rocanrol, que se bailaba a gran velocidad y a veces acrobáticamente” (Contracultura 35). As the young rebels became increasingly visible, the reaction of the Mexican press and government became more and more intolerant. The rebels, and through them rock and roll, came to symbolize rebellion against tradition and the establishment more than economic and social
modernization. Once rock and roll moved to the lower classes, that is, once it was popularized, the members of the elite lost interest in it, using it as a way of attacking the lower classes for their loose morals.\(^{19}\)

Perhaps the event that best helped to solidify these ideas was the King Creole riot of 1959. The King Creole riot occurred in May, 1959, at the Américas Cinema during a viewing of Elvis Presley’s movie *King Creole*. Around 600 “rebels without a cause” stormed the theater, taking it over and accosting many of the women attending. Moviegoers were later detained by the police upon leaving the theater.\(^{20}\) This incident, as the Avándaro festival would some ten years later, unified rock and roll’s detractors from both the left and the right.\(^{21}\) Critics from the right decried the King Creole incident as a manifestation of the loosening morals of Mexican youth directly linked to North American influence. Rock and roll became the scapegoat for the ills of society. The government also used it to distract the national focus from the authoritarian nature of the government and the problems of urban poverty (Zolov 50-51). Although rock and roll was still seen as a symbol of economic modernization, the negative connotations that rock and roll acquired through the rebel without a cause phenomenon and the King Creole incident seriously curtailed the positive influence of rock and roll. As Zolov states, “[f]or the ‘modernizers,’ therefore, ultimately the question was how to censor the noxious influences of the mass media while retaining the modernizing elements so basic to an image of progress” (46).

The King Creole incident and the growing perception of rock and roll as undermining traditional family values were factors in measures by the government of López Mateos to legislate mass culture. In 1959, the secretary of communications stated
that radio stations airing less than 25% national production would face fines. Subsequently, in 1960, the Mexican legislature passed the Federal Law of Radio and Television, which implemented protectionist policies that included reserving a half hour of daily programming time to be used for the diffusion of educational/cultural programming. Also included in the legislation were provisions to “clean up” the airways, providing measures for eliminating profanity and more importantly defamations of national heroes. A year later, in 1961, the Mexican government added a protective tariff on foreign records (Zolov 53-67).

The basic response to this was the formation of a sanitized form of rock and roll. Most groups at this moment played refritos, Spanish language covers of North American hits. Local production, while still within the musical innovation of rock and roll, omits the social implications found in their North American counterparts. Groups like the Teen Tops and the Rebeldes del Rock fit in more with the anthem from Los Locos del Ritmo – “Yo no soy un rebelde” in which the rockers explain that they are not rebels without a cause, but rather just want to be able to continue rock and rolling. In other words, Mexican rock and roll from this time period is a fairly benign movement that does not seek to displace or subvert authority; it just wants to have a good time.

The introduction of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones via the United States around 1964 proved to be a turning point in the development of rock music in Mexico. Earlier, the music rather than the lyrics were more important, with many middle class rock fans unable to understand the English language songs. The primary difference with the “British Invasion” was that these same youth started taking note of what the songs were saying. Zolov argues that “[w]hereas earlier the lyric content had been less
important than the musical rhythm-allowing for the wide success of the refritos, which often took liberties in their translations from the original-now what was said became as important as how it was said” (94). The music of the Beatles and the Stones came to Mexican youth, interpreted by a new wave of bands like the Dug Dugs, who recreated English language versions of the originals.

It is also in this second stage of rock in Mexico that the drug scene becomes combined with the music scene. Following the trips by R. Gordon Wasson, a banker from New York, to Huatla de Jiménez in 1953 and 1955 as well as his Life magazine article from 1957, Mexico became a mecca for those seeking hallucinogenic experiences. Wasson’s experiences with hallucinogenic mushrooms came at a time when LSD, first synthesized in Switzerland in 1938, was becoming a very popular consciousness altering drug. In many ways, the social / spiritual use of LSD plays a large role in another phenomenon that is also intimately related to the rock culture industry, that of the hippies, or “jipiteca” movement as it became known in Mexico. On both coasts of the United States, Ken Kesey, author of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, and Timothy Leary, psychologist at Harvard University, founded communities based on shared experience of LSD. 23 These groups became the precursors to the more widespread hippy movements that spread throughout the country, most famously installing themselves in the Haight-Ashbury zone of San Francisco. Wasson’s experiences with mushrooms came at a very propitious moment for the burgeoning hippy culture and as early as 1962, youth from the United States began arriving at Huatla (Agustin Contraclutura 59-66). It was only a small step from North American drug users to begin favoring Mexico to drugs appearing
in the Mexican youth culture itself. As early as 1965, drugs began filtering into the cafés cantantes, where Mexican youth would go to hear rock ‘n’ roll.

Because of the “British Invasion” and the introduction of drugs to the counterculture, in 1964 (the same year, incidentally, that Agustín publishes his first novel, *La tumba*), the rock experience in Mexico shifts from one marginally associated with high culture to a more subversive counterculture. The introduction of a consciousness about the lyrics of rock music as well as the drug antiestablishment trend also parallels the growing consciousness that will culminate in the student protests of 1968 and the Massacre at Tlateloco, where government forces opened fire on student protest in Mexico City, killing an unknown number. Mexico in this period experienced a deep generational gap pitting the younger generation against the Establishment. The defining moments for this are the aforementioned student protests of 1968, and the Rock Festival at Avándaro. The aftermath of the student protests helps to solidify the counterculture more than any other event. José Agustín relates that on one hand, some saw the repression of the students as a sign of the domination of the government and he draws the conclusion that from this the guerrilla movement of Guerrero State and the urban guerrilla movement in large cities are formed. Others, however, saw in the jipiteca movement of nonviolent confrontation a better mode of resistance to the Establishment. The jipitecas also empathized with the student movement at this time and in many cases began to take a serious view of their social consciousness; Agustín states that, “[d]e esta manera se formó la onda, las manifestaciones culturales de numerosos jóvenes mexicanos que habían filtrado los planteamientos jipis a través de la durísima realidad del movimiento estudiantil. Era mucho más amplio, que abarcaba a
chavos de pelo largo que oían rocanrol, fumaban mariguana y estaban resentidos contra el país en general por la represión antijuvenil de los últimos doce años” (Contracultura 83).

The Festival de Avándaro, sometimes called the Mexican Woodstock, was held in conjunction with an annual road derby and drew over 200,000 fans to hear Mexican rock music. Avándaro was probably more successful than its organizers could ever have imagined. It brought criticism from both the left and the right to bear on the counterculture movement: those on the right were shocked at the loose morals exhibited, and even highlighted at the festival. The liberal use of marijuana and other drugs, and the overt sexuality incarnated in the “encuerada de Avándaro,” gave evidence to those on the right who feared the moral decline of Mexican youth. Those on the left also criticized the Avándaro festival, first for being a commercial replication of the North American hippy festival turned profitable, Woodstock. Carlos Monsiváís states that, “organizamos algo como de gringos, un festival a lo Woodstock, naturaleza y música, la oportunidad de fotografías venturosas, [...] Pueblo pintoresco, lago artificial, montes de belleza kodakchrome” (Amor perdido 248). Avándaro was seen as another example of North American cultural imperialism, but it was also seen as way of depoliticizing the counterculture after the violence of June 10. No matter the causes for criticism, the fact that the counterculture is criticized so vehemently from so many sectors of the public sphere led to an almost en masse abandonment of the counterculture by many young Mexicans. As José Agustín puts it, “[l]a onda fue satanizada a tal punto que los jóvenes de clase media desertaron de ella y al final sólo los más pobres y marginados continuaron dándose el toque siempre fiel al rock mexicano” (Contracultura 89).
From 1950, with the introduction of television and the beginning of the rock age, through 1964 with the introduction of the drug subculture and the music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, to Avándaro in 1971, the counterculture from which the Onda writers borrowed transformed middle class youth in Mexico. A topic of controversy and of conversation, the youth movement certainly left an indelible impression, both positive and negative, on the national psyche. Although the Onda is generally associated with rock music, and even with foreign rock music, it goes far beyond that. In the same way that the rock movement represented a subversion, or at least a different path, from the traditional, even canonical idea of instrumental music, the counterculture fostered its own literary production. Writers who listened to the Dug Dugs and the Rolling Stones sought to break down the barriers between the concept of high (canonical) literature and mass culture and to incorporate elements of the culture that they saw and experienced into their art.

The works of Carlos Monsiváis underscore the dynamic of resistance and domination that is found in the mass culture debate in a way that complements the texts of other Onda writers. Monsiváis, as one of the preeminent cultural critics of his day and a contemporary of Agustín, Sainz, García Saldaña, and Manjarrez, also helps to examine the idea of a youth movement and youth writing that typify critical analysis of the Onda writers. It is important to note that while Monsiváis’s criticism does demonstrate a recognition of mass culture as a form of resistance, his works tend to emphasize the idea of mass culture as a form of domination and cultural imperialism.

Monsiváis’ early works tend to dwell less on the cultural imperialist implications of mass culture, and even admire the products of the North American culture industry. In
his autobiography published in 1966, Monsiváis explains the ambiguous feelings he has for North America. He states, “[f]uera de su sistema político, de su conducta racial, de su pretensión de líder mundial y de su presencia en Vietnam, todo lo demás de Estados Unidos me resulta definitivamente admirable. Su música –el jazz, el spiritual, el blues, el rock, hace posible la vasta utilización de los sentidos contemporáneos” (Monsiváis 60). Initially, at least, Monsiváis admires North American mass culture and sees it as an example to be followed. Music from the US provides an innovative new experience.

His acceptance of the culture industry shifts subtly from the context of his autobiography to that in Días de guardar (1970). This selection of essays has a lot in common with the narrative Onda works, including a preoccupation with what constitutes the Onda phenomenon. It must be noted that Monsiváis uses the term Onda in a much broader way than I will, to refer to the entire counterculture movement. He explains that, “LA ONDA / la que porta mayúscula para enfatizar su destino de tribu existencial. Son los hippies mexicanos, los bohemios, los outsiders reales o fingidos, a quienes se conoce como Onda, o quienes desearian se les identificase con la Onda” (Días 118-119). Onda is a group dynamic that emphasizes resistance to the mainstream. It is an imagined community that utilizes common modes of dress, attitude, and taste to distinguish it from traditional Mexican society. Monsiváis adds that, “[l]a Onda ha patentado el vicario gráfico: los grupos de rock, desde la cumbre de sus portadas, se visten por nosotros, desafían a la sociedad decente en nuestro nombre, renuevan la moda en nuestra representación” (Días 119). Monsiváis complains, however, that Onda does not give a clear definition of itself. To be “en la Onda” has such varied meanings and connotations that it gets mired in complications of identity. Onda is long haired hippies who smoke
marijuana and take LSD or hallucinogenic mushrooms. Onda is rock music. Onda is a mystical sense of connection to humanity and a rejection of war, imperialism and oppression. Above all else, Onda is hard to define, except as an opposition to institutions. Monsiváis states that, “[l]a Onda es un rechazo, a muy diferentes niveles y contratando riesgos muy variados. La Onda es un estado de ánimo. La Onda es un chance que sí. La Onda es una complejísima realidad que, hablando a la mexicana, *nomás no existe*” (Días 106). The only basic elements that connects all aspects of the Onda are: a rejection, a resistance if you will, to societal norms, and an interest in rock music.

If Onda is an aesthetic and societal statement of resistance, then rock groups are the spokesperson for it. Rock music, as Monsiváis explains, both as group identifier as well as outward sign of resistance, is enormously important for the idea of Onda. For the Onda, he argues, “[e]l rock ha sido escuela, Universidad. Y ahora están en su tercer o cuarto año de rock ácido y hablan Jimi Hendrix o Rolling Stones del modo en que pudieron hablar Cream o Traffic o como jamás dijeron cosa alguna en Monkees o en Archies” (Días 102). Rock is the mode of educating or enculturating a member into the social group, outlining the expectations and common base of knowledge necessary to be part of the Onda culture.

A part of this enculturation is the language of the Onda, the area that Monsiváis sees as the most innovative of the group. The language of the Onda reflects a societal renovation and vitality that is not found in the entrenched official discourse and linguistic norms. Monsiváis contends that, “[f]rente al ánimo pétreo de un lenguaje que ha abdicado de la tensión para adherirse a la distorsión, el ritmo pendular de la vida
Mexicana ha encontrado en esa regocijada decisión lingüística de la Onda, su equilibrio y su escape” (Días 104). The language of the Onda allows for a richer exploration of language itself and for a better mode of self expression. Because of this, the language of the Onda opposes order and works as a force of cultural resistance to an all encompassing official culture.

In his exploration of the Onda, Monsivais maintains the image of an objective outsider, referring to the narrative voice as the observer in the section “Dios nunca muere” that talks of the eclipse of 1970. In a very direct statement, he dictates that, “[e]l observador no cree en la Onda, no entiende la Onda sino como un problema que él soluciona con teorías, no con actitudes” (Días 105). He continues by outlining the basic problems that he has with the Onda lifestyle: that they are anti-intelectual and overly romantic to the point of triteness. In addition to these criticisms, Monsiváis on numerous occasions refers to the Onda as a pattern of behavior, indicating a complicit domination to a set of intellectual or physicals ideals. He explains that, “[l]a Onda es su horma. La horma, la concepción de las reglas precisas a que todo rostro debe atenerse, varía [. . .] Cualquier cosa, menos la horma satisfecha, complacida, bienamada, la horma que rezuma el inmenso cuidado protector que un hombre de porvenir le debe a las líneas faciales que presidirán su madurez” (Días 102). The ideal of the Onda dictates one’s actions, taste, and even in some cases ideology.

As Monsiváis continues his theoretical development, his ideas about North American mass culture change dramatically. At first he saw the Onda as a model for behavior, but he later concludes that the North American culture industry had too much power. His theory of the North Americanization of culture implies that the US culture
industry dominates Mexican mass culture in a type of cultural imperialism. Besides the characteristics already mentioned, Monsiváis sees a deliberate rejection of the idea of Mexican identity. He argues that, “[e]l concepto México fue para los jipitecas cárcel y castración” (Amor perdido 236). The jipitecas and the onderos wanted to disassociate themselves a national identity, and this process takes the form of an implicit acceptance of North American mass culture. The idols of the counterculture are the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary from the Eurocentric North American culture industry. For Monsiváis the most iconic event of the Onda phenomenon, the Avándaro festival, highlighted this imperialism. Despite the overt demonstration of sexual and generational rebellion, “Avándaro es una respuesta original y es, también, un hecho colonial, no porque un festival de rock sea exclusive de la cultura norteamericana, sino por el réclame básico: duplicar sin problemas una experiencia ajena; es decir, una vez más, ponernos al día gracias a la emulación servil” (Amor perdido 252).

The evidence of Avándaro’s status as colonized event is not that it expresses the youth identity through rock and a countercultural ideology, but rather that it tries to clone the Woodstock experience complete with its market success. Therein lies the imperialism, through the cooption of the counterculture due to market forces.

Interestingly enough, the influence that Monsiváis sees in the Mexican culture industry is also prevalent in his own writings. From early on, he inundates his essays with direct North American cultural references in a very deliberate parallel to the themes that he is exploring. For instance, the essay “Para todas las cosas hay sazón” dialogues directly with the Byrd’s song “To ev’ry Thing.” In this essay about the Onda, Monsiváis talks once again about the “horma” of the Onda and the fact that, “[l]a Onda hace chistes”
(Días 119). From this point, he integrates a parody of the Byrds song, giving subtitles to sections about the different social / economic divisions of the youth culture like, “Tiempo de abrazar y tiempo de alejarse de abrazar” (Días 121), or “Tiempo de esparcir las piedras y tiempo de allegar las piedras” (Días 124). Monsiváis directly relates the essay to the Byrds and to the influence of the North American counterculture for Mexico. He states that:

*To ev’ry Thing (turn, turn, turn) There is a season (turn, turn, turn).* Los Byrds vocean (uno supone) su mensaje, las palabras anteriores al Poder Negro, anteriores a la toma de la rectoría de Columbia, anteriores al combate con las fuerzas del Alcalde Daley en Chicago, anteriores, ¿por qué no?, al Movimiento Estudiantil de México. *And a time to ev’ry purpose under heaven.* (Días 123)

The biblical reference overtly enters the realm of mass culture and through this mass culture Monsiváis connects the Mexican student movement to the countercultural protests in the United States (both the Black Power movement as well as the North American student protests).

The infiltration by North American mass culture into Monsiváis’s prose does not stop when he becomes even more vociferously anti-imperialist in his criticism of the culture industry. In *Amor perdido*, where Monsiváis emphatically denounces the Avándaro festival as a manifestation of North American cultural hegemony, he also uses mass culture to emphasize his argument. Talking about the difficulties involved in organizing the festival and its subsequent consequences, Monsiváis repeats the Janis Joplin refrain, “Try (just a little bit harder)” (248-251). Despite the fact that he complains about the commercial imitation of Woodstock, Monsiváis cannot help
emphasizing this in his essay with one of the iconic names from Woodstock. That is, mass culture from North of the border invades the critical dialogue about the Onda in the same way that the North American culture industry invades the Mexican counterculture scene.

Another example of the North Americanization of Monsiváis’s prose comes from the essay “Miss Mexico.” Monsiváis talks of the pageant in the context of national identity as well as women’s liberation. At one point, he argues that, “[l]as concursantes se rinden y pregonan sus gustos de jóvenes modernas: creencia en las bondades de la astrología, recetas de belleza, músicos predilectos: Barry White, Los Bee Gees, Los Beatles” (Amor perdido 221). The recipe for success seems to include a fascination for astrological mysticism and a predilection for popular North American culture industry icons, all of which Monsiváis explicitly ties to modern youth. That is, North American mass culture not only became an important part of the youth identity, but also made inroads into the national identity through its importance in the selection of representative Mexican youth and beauty. Sandwiched between the farewell speech of the former Miss Mexico and the declaration of the new Miss Mexico appear the lyrics “HAPPY TOGETHER (IMAGINE YOU AND ME)” (Amor perdido 222). The inclusion of the Turtles’ song highlights the North American culture industry for both the proceedings of the Miss Mexico pageant as well as the way they have influenced Monsiváis’s own aesthetic. He includes North American mass culture to criticize the established system from which the beauty pageant comes.

Thus, Monsiváis’ works demonstrate the spectrum of attitudes towards mass culture. He gradually comes to promote a vision of mass culture as domination, both in
the direct cultural imperialism of North American mass culture as well as the domination implicit in the North Americanization of the Mexican culture industry. At the same time that Monsiváis recognizes the ability of mass culture to function as a force of domination, he also recognizes its ability to resist the rigid societal norms, like sexual bias, or the stagnation of language. Monsiváis uses mass culture in his prose to parody the official discourse that would promote North American mass culture, thus subverting the intention of mass culture. For instance, by juxtaposing the beauty pageant and North American mass culture, Monsiváis shows the frivolity and meaninglessness of both forms of culture. Mass culture for Monsiváis is a bipolar entity which constantly shifts the balance of power from domination to resistance; while he favors the domination position regarding mass culture, he cannot help but recognize both domination and resistance. This preoccupation with the validity of mass culture in the Mexican context, the dynamic of domination and resistance, is something that Monsiváis shares with the other Onda authors Agustín, Sainz, García Saldaña and Manjarrez.

One of the most studied authors from this generation, and the one most connected to the literary Onda, José Agustín began his literary career by looking at youth culture and intellectual culture. Examining his novel, *La tumba* (1964), provides a good introduction to the resistance to an Establishment through mass culture found in the Onda texts. In *La tumba*, Agustín uses mass culture to distinguish between an internal desire on the part of his protagonist, Gabriel Gúia, to be an intellectual and his participation in the youth culture of the 60s. These two modes of experience (the intellectual and the youth) prove conflictive. The novel, in fact, vacillates between these modes, describing on the one hand the sexual exploits of Gabriel and his rejection of his parents’ world view
while on the other hand portraying his skills as a narrator. It suggests that the two processes, intellectual activity and counterculture, are not mutually exclusive. Gabriel as a protagonist is caught up in the licentious anti-establishment partying of his generation, but he cannot detain his intellectual faculties, nor does he feel he should. It is this intersection of circumstances that drives him to the brink of his own destruction.

Gabriel’s intellectual abilities are evident throughout the narration. In fact, the novel begins with an episode in which his teacher, after receiving a “tip” from one of his classmates, accuses him of plagiarism on a creative writing assignment. The professor affirms that “se parece mucho a Chéjov” (12), a fact which initially infuriates Gabriel. However, our narrator also sees the accusation of plagiarism as an unintended compliment, remarking that, “[s]us palabras hicieron que mi ira se disipase para ceder lugar a la satisfacción. Como elogio había estado complicado, pero a fin de cuentas, era un elogio a todo dar” (12). The fact that he can pass off his own creation as that of a canonical author like Chekov indicates both the Gabriel’s literary talent as well as his need for such praise, however indirect it may be. Despite his snobbish façade, Gabriel harbors a secret desire to be recognized by those who dictate what “real” of high culture is.

Throughout the novel, Gabriel strives to continue and improve his literary production, toying with various genres and themes; that is, he does not just produce works worthy of being compared to Chekov. At one point, the narrator indicates, “me encerré en mi cuarto para escribir el intrincado conflicto de una niña de doce años enamorada de su primito, de ocho” (11). Later he states, “decidí trabajar literariamente. Escribir una novela. Me encerraba en mi cuarto casi todo el día, escribiendo capítulos
que nunca me gustaban y que perecían en el bote de la basura” (62). As Gabriel is exploring his own identity as an adolescent, he is at the same time exploring his intellectual identity. This exploration provides an escape from his life, in much the same way that mass culture provides an escape for those who consume it. Gabriel declares his intentions to produce this novel just after the death of his cousin Laura, thus throwing himself into his literature in order to overcome the grieving process.

One of the few texts of Gabriel’s that we as readers are allowed to examine, his poem “No soy nada y soy eterno,” is a product of his disillusionment following Laura’s death and is replete with a tangible existential angst. Gabriel writes of a “voz que se pierde en susurro” and of an “[e]xistencia sin razón” (62). This poem paves the way for the conclusion of the novel, in which Gabriel contemplates suicide, and (in another literary act) pens his own poetic epitaph. These examples of his literary production, combined with his trite poems and discourses which he uses to seduce Elsa, prove that Gabriel lives his life through his art and that his art is profoundly tied to his personal life. He considers himself above all else a writer, even if he is one who is struggling with his own production, a fact which he continually refers to regarding his difficulty writing his novel. His desire to be a writer is ironically tied into his desire to form a part of the literary Establishment at the same time that his actions vacillate between intellectual and counterculture: establishment and resistance. In this case, however, the status quo is seen through the literary establishment as opposed to the domination of mass culture, and his resistance to traditional high culture is found in the counterculture youth lifestyle.

To fit the societal idea of intellectual, Gabriel engages in pursuits that are expected of an intellectual. For example, he participates in the Círculo Literario
Moderno, a group of developing writers. His participation serves to highlight the differences and at times similarities between his adolescent identity and his intellectual identity. Gabriel first becomes interested in the Círculo due to his sexual interest in Dora, who is already involved in the group. His apparent indifference to the actual activities of the Círculo is evident in his reaction to the first meeting. Gabriel narrates that, after the introductory business (his induction being the highlight):

Se leyó una carta de Herr Kafka, pero no atendí al lector: su voz era una apetecible invitación al estrangulamiento. Luego dieron opiniones y me abstuve por lo ya dicho. Más pude percibir que Paco Kafka podría ser considerado como un mediocre cualquiera, con sólo basarse en la crítica de los circuloliterariomodernistas. . . . Después, un joven de mirada turbia se colocó unas gafas para leer: Cofradía sexual, poema dodecasilábico con rimas impares y sinalefas evitadas dedicado a Julio Enrique. Y nos martirizó con su infamia rimada. Lamentablemente, aún soportamos seis poemas más, suivis de sus respectivas críticas. (26)

Not only does Gabriel despise the production of the members of his literary club, as his intellectual martyrdom attests, but he also disdains authors like Kafka as merely mediocre writers based on their comments. In other words, his feelings of superiority are such that if they are able to like a certain author or topic then, for Gabriel, it cannot possibly have any worth.

Gabriel’s feelings for the Círculo, and indeed his whole attitude about it is summed up in his thoughts, “¿Masa encefálica, o fálica nada más?” (35). For Gabriel, the Círculo is never a space of intellectual activity, but rather one in which he can seek to
further his sexual education. For this reason, he decides to join the Círculo in the first place. His lack of interest in the intellectual activities of the group and marked interest in the women of the group is emphasized in another meeting in which the narrator admits that “[c]onfesé no haber escuchado [. . .]” (68). However, Gabriel notice the friend of Rosaura and Vicky, a potential new member. Gabriel reflects that, “era muy bonita y me sorprendí admirándola. . . Esbelta, alta –casi de mi estatura-, piel acariciable. Y los ojos grises, gélidos [. . .]” (68). His social interest in the group far overshadows any intellectual interest that he may have had at the very beginning. The Círculo is just one more activity in which Gabriel feels he should participate, but in which he finds no satisfaction except possibly his ability to meet and court the female members.

The meetings of the Círculo Literario contrast markedly with another of Gabriel’s activities, this time an activity more worthy of his status as part of the bourgeois youth and a resistance to the societal norms. Throughout the novel, Gabriel throws parties and spends much of his free time taking advantage of the club scene. It is also through these activities that Gabriel explores his sexual side, having sexual encounters with numerous women, including his own aunt. The licentious facet of Gabriel’s identity clearly connects with the countercultural image that he wants to portray. The “rebel without a cause” façade that Gabriel embodies, complete with a total lack of respect for his parents, is expressed through partying, sexual encounters and mass culture: that is, with sex, drugs (alcohol) and rock and roll.

Gabriel clearly has two divergent yet important elements in his identity development: the intellectual which in turn is invaded by the youth element (resistance). One must ask the question, then, how the cultural artifacts, both high and mass culture,
that Gabriel consumes fit into this construction? Do these artifacts reflect the differing
elements of his identity in an almost binary opposition, High culture belonging to his
intellectual identity and mass culture to his youthful side? Or, is the interplay between
these cultures even more complex?

In looking at this topic, perhaps the easiest place to start is with the examples of
mass culture that appear in the text. Gabriel is above all a music lover and music plays a
very important role in the novel. In general, Agustin’s protagonist prefers the classical
music of Wagner or other composers to the more popular mass culture music like rock
and jazz. As an intellectual, Gabriel’s tastes lie with that most high culture of musical
productions, opera, and when he is free to consume the form of culture that he prefers, he
plays classical music. Juan Bruce-Novoa has examined the connection between
Agustin’s novel and the most cited musical work it contains, Die Lohengrin by Wagner.32
Bruce-Novoa claims that La tumba functions as a structural and thematic parody of the
Wagnerian opera, to the point that the ideal woman from the opera shares her name with
the desired woman in Agustin’s work. Bruce-Novoa goes on to argue that the differences
between the two works of art lend the novel a parodic element: Wagner’s opera takes
place on a grand scale – Lohengrin is a god and Elsa a noble, while Agustin’s novel
occupies an impure middle class. Through this use of parody, says Bruce-Novoa,
Agustin places himself clearly within the parodic tradition that encompasses literature
through the ages.33

In the novel, it is not difficult to find a parody of appearances in Gabriel’s
consumption of culture, both mass and high culture. Gabriel consumes the type of
culture that he is supposed to in the contexts that he is supposed to, conforming to
cultural stereotypes and expectations. Thus, he reads French poetry and listens to classical music when he is exercising his role as intellectual, but when he moves into the sphere of (subversive?) youth culture he switches to film, jazz and even rock music. Gabriel often looks upon these mass culture forms with the same disdain, especially for rock music, that he shows for the Círculo Literario. The narrator asserts that “[a] Laura no le gustó Solitude de Duke Ellington y puso unos rocks comprados en una debilidad pasajera” (54). Gabriel sees Laura’s preference for rock as a passing weakness, even trite. In terms of mass culture, Gabriel himself prefers one of the precursors of rock, and a genre that is closer to being “canonized” as high culture, jazz, or goes one step further up the hierarchy of taste to his beloved opera. When he goes out to buy himself birthday presents with his father’s money, he buys albums by Louis Armstrong, Nat Adderly (jazz) and Debussy and Grieg (classical music) rather than the music of Elvis Presley, Neil Sedaka or Bill Haley, representatives of the rock and roll movement.

The place of rock music and film in La tumba (as icons of mass culture) is primarily as a backdrop to the parties throughout the novel. Gabriel listens to rock as a manifestation of his countercultural youth identity; it is a social phenomenon – a way to show participation in the youth movement. Rock and roll matters more for what it symbolizes, youth and rebellion, than for its aesthetic qualities or even the message in the songs; the protagonists of the novel do not pay attention to what the songs say, they simply listen to them as a way of expressing a rebellious identity. This participation even infiltrates the language Gabriel uses. In talking about a party that he and Laura attended at the Senator’s house, Gabriel explains that, “rocanroleamos sin tregua” (58), and later in talking about his own party, “[. . .] la orquesta atacaba un rocanrol. Mis amigos aullaron
de alegría al empezar las hostilidades, bailándolo. . . . Tal parece que el rock fue grito de guerra, pues empezaron a llover invitados en busca de jaiboles” (88 – italics mine).

Rock music takes on the bellic tone of the generation gap. Rocanrolear is to embrace the youth culture, to defy authority and to let oneself act unfettered by tradition. In fact, during the party at the Senator’s, Gabriel urinates in the sink and breaks several objects in the house, another manifestation of his disregard for propriety, property and authority.

As for the two parties at his own house, after the first party, Gabriel spends the night with his aunt, their incest being the ultimate symbol of breaking with traditional societal values. Following the second party, Gabriel’s father criticizes him for spending the night with his girlfriend Elsa, once again overtly flaunting the norms of society.

Structurally, rock music also has an effect on La tumba, although Agustín does not subsume narrative to mass culture as Mario Rojas suggests. Rock music in the novel, however, does offers a direct correlation to the plot. One of the few epigraphs that contains a rock reference is from Neil Sedaka. The text reads “Run Samson run / Delilah’s on her way / Run Samson run / I ain’t got time to stay” (39). This reference to the 1960 hit by Sedaka also presages the relationship of Gabriel with his aunt and later the death of his cousin (the narrative begins with the reunion of the aunt’s family). The text by Sedaka, “Run Samson run,” alludes to the problems that Gabriel will have with “Delilah” – first the incest with his aunt, but also the frivolous relationship that he will maintain with her and then his brush with death. These two events, encapsulated in the warning by Sedaka, frame this narrative section and also serve to emphasize Gabriel’s moral descent into complete licentious abandon and existential despair.
The other instance of rock music emphasizing plot occurs when Gabriel decides to play Elvis Presley’s “Jailhouse Rock” following his birthday party and the disagreement with his father over Elsa staying the night. The choice of “Jailhouse Rock,” which describes a party thrown by the warden of the prison for his prisoners, mimics Gabriel’s own mixed feelings about his father, who threw a party for him. He feels trapped between the walls of his house, under his parents’ hypocritical authority. The Elvis song comes at the precise moment when Gabriel understands that his mother is out with one of her lovers and after his father, who is notorious for his extramarital affairs, has just scolded Gabriel for his affair.

Gabriel’s case offers a very interesting contradiction between high and low, domestic and foreign cultural productions. As an intellectual he ties himself to the traditional bastions of high culture like the French poets, such as Rimbaud, and to Western classical music. At the same time he is also a connoisseur of jazz and, to a more limited extent, rock and roll, showing the increasing importance of the North American culture industries for Mexican middle class consumption. He is a writer, but also a partier. Gabriel shows the beginning of the literary countercultural protagonist, who rejects parental (national?) authority in part through his choice of mass culture and the manner in which it is consumed. Mass culture in this novel serves to highlight the personal, and to a large extent societal, conflict between a disenchanted and frantic youth culture and the traditional role and concept of the intellectual. Gabriel truly enjoys classical music and the refinements of “high” culture, but in order to be a part of the anti-establishment youth trend, he plays loud rock music to annoy his mother and holds large parties where drinking, sex, jazz and rock and roll are the norm.
Although it was not published until 1970, *El rey Criollo* by Parménides García Saldaña, was written contemporaneously with Agustín’s *La tumba* and *De perfil* as well as Sainz’s *Gazapo*. García Saldaña finished the collection of short stories between 1964 and 1966. As José Agustín says, “de haber aparecido cuando se escribió habría compartido la conmoción literaria que causaron *Gazapo* y *De perfil*” ([Contracultura](#) 142).

In addition to sharing a temporal mark with Agustín’s novel, the collection of short stories utilizes mass culture in a way that is very similar to its function in *La tumba*: as a manifestation of youth rebellion and a benchmark of social status.

The short story, “Bye Bye Love,” takes its title untranslated from the Rolling Stones song, and tells the story of Estela and Jaime, two adolescents in the process of dating and then breaking up. Mass culture serves to punctuate the relationship and distancing that comes between them through the repetition of the Everly Brothers’ song, “Bye Bye Love.” The song, in fact, serves a repetitive function appearing both at the beginning and at the end of their relationship. Estela dances to “Bye Bye Love” the night that she breaks up with Tomás to go out with Jaime. As the story progresses, and Jaime and Estela themselves break up over the phone, Jaime plays “Bye Bye Love” on his record player, once again emphasizing the rather trite similarities between his own situation and the topic of the song. The narration takes this connection one step further, directly combining the lyrics of the Everly Brothers with Jaime’s own state of mind:

“Bye bye love. Las mujeres no eran como el álgebra. Hello emptiness. Eran una incógnita, casi no tenían solución. I feel like I could die. A + B = C. My love good bye, good bye, good bye. Claudia estaba acostada a su lado izquierdo, mirándolo. [. . .]” (27-28). This passage shows the fusion of Jaime’s emotional state and the mass culture
version of love to such an extent that the line between them becomes very hazy. That is, the lyrics of the song exist in two different planes. On the one hand they are a part of the mass culture which is mass consumed and so carries all of the baggage that goes along with it. On the other hand, they are Jaime’s feelings, internalized as well as externalized through this song. This in-between status, and the extent to which Jaime externalizes his feelings inspired by mass culture is accentuated by the final repetition of “good bye” that does not appear in the song itself. Jaime holds onto these lyrics as a way of prolonging, as well as expressing his emotions. In this way, mass culture serves as a way of internally communicating intimacy and loss.

It should be noted that including popular music to show the protagonist’s emotional state of the protagonist is perhaps the easiest way of introducing mass culture into literature. We can see this as a way of exploring the idea of mass culture. For instance, the fact that Jaime uses mass culture to express his feelings shows the power mass culture has over him. Emotions are highly nuanced, contradictory and complex, and can scarcely be explored fully in a 3 to 5 minute song. Jaime’s appropriation of music in order to explore his own feelings highlights the way in which mass culture dictates norms and reactions. Jaime does not have to face his own emotions regarding his break up with Estela, but rather can fit the generic mold provided by the culture industry; his emotions are no longer individual. In this way, mass culture provides a controlling presence, yet a very subtle one, in his life, dictating the way he should feel and the form this expression takes.

Just as mass culture follows the action of “Bye Bye Love”, it accentuates the action of other stories in the collection. In “El encuentro,” Alejandro contemplates
whether Patricia will make love to him, followed by the ironic “Love, love me do / you know I love you . . .” (112). Once again, the lyrics of a love song by the Beatles correlates with Alejandro’s very internal, personal desire that Patricia “love” him (in this case, physically). Later in this same story, Patricia and Alejandro have a falling out after they do sleep together. In this passage, the conversation between the two is punctuated by the Righteous Brothers’ “You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling.”

The last short story, and the one that gives its name to the collection, “El rey Criollo,” examines mass culture in a different way. This short story tells of the events of the King Creole riot. Interestingly enough, the short story begins with a Rolling Stones song, as do all of the stories in the collection, but also with the lyrics from the Locos del Ritmo ballad, “Yo no soy un rebelde sin causa / Ni tampoco un desenfrenado / Lo único que quiero es bailar el rock” (159). This passage sets the tone for the short story, but does so in an ironic fashion. The song tells of a desire to be left alone so that one can listen and consume the music that one prefers. As the short story progresses, the narrator takes time to reflect upon the societal consumption of North American rock and roll in the form of Elvis Presley songs. As stated earlier, the carefree attitude of live and let live that the Locos del Ritmo song alludes to quickly gives way to another more “rebel without a cause” reaction. The narrator begins by recalling the screening of Prisionero del Rockandrol in the cine Roble. He recalls that “cuando terminó y todo mundo salía feliz después de haber visto Elvis Presley cantando y bailando sus grandes éxitos (“Jailhouse Rock,” “Young and Beatiful,” “I Want to Be Free,” “Don’t Leave Me Now,” “You’re so Square –Baby I Don’t Care”), y cuando todo mundo estaba ya muy tranquilo y contento, que empiezan los golpes en el lobby” (159). Elvis initially fosters a spirit of
participation, an “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s terminology. The young people present at the cine Roble enter into the proceedings in a spirit of togetherness and common interest; they all are there to listen to rock and to watch Elvis Presley on the big screen. This idyllic, even idealistic brotherhood of consumption is quickly marred, however, by the geographical and economic conflicts that incite the various youth gangs, breaking into violence just as the aura of community is wearing off. While the protagonist might want nothing more than to be left alone to listen to rock and roll, society and the various forces working on society will not permit this. In this way, the short story can be seen as a microcosm of the actual effects of the King Creole riot, after which the government and other forces actively worked to suppress rock culture in Mexico, and foreign rock music above all.

In García Saldaña’s collection of short stories, mass culture is utilized to emphasize the actions and reactions of the protagonists on both a structural and a thematic level. Mass culture imitates life just as life imitates mass culture. *El rey Criollo* shows part of the attraction of rock music; that it speaks to the life experiences of a person, especially an adolescent to whom the music is marketed. As with *La tumba*, the narrative style of García Saldaña’s collection is fairly simple; both works contain a narrator relating a story in a rather straightforward manner. The fact that the narration is simple, does not mean that García Saldaña does not make use of mass culture as narrative technique.

In fact, the very structure of the novel centers around mass culture, which could be seen as a form of resistance to traditional and even more technically complex narrative techniques then in fashion. This collection of short stories centers around a series of
songs by the Rolling Stones. Each short story contains the Spanish language translation of the song as a preface to the story itself. Thus, the story “Un día triste, triste” is preaced with the song “Mother’s Little Helper,” “Una actitud sincera” with “Complicated,” “La espera” with “Ruby Tuesday,” and so on. García Saldaña constructs his own version of a greatest hits album, compiling a group of Rolling Stones songs together in a very specific, conscientious collection. The very idea of an album, a collection of songs, indicates distance and cohesion at the same time. An album is made up of separate songs that together form a unified artistic vision, perhaps focusing on various aspects of a theme or containing similar rhythmic or thematic elements. The “album” implied in the collection of short stories in the same way gives the whole work a certain cohesiveness, all of the “songs” relating in technique and sometimes in topic. Thus, on the macro level, the narration imitates mass culture with the book being the album in which the various short story / songs are included.

Mass culture as structure does not work only on the macro level, however. The Rolling Stones songs within the collection work as a miniaturized version or form of the short story that is about to unfold. For example, the story “Bye Bye Love” is combined with the song “Heart of Stone.” This song expresses the narrator’s attitude towards a failed relationship, which tends towards impersonality and callousness as a defense mechanism. The Rolling Stone’s song asks “¿Qué es diferente en ella? / De verdad que no sé. / No importa cómo trate. / Nomás no puedo hacerla llorar” only to respond in a repetitive chorus that “nunca romperá este corazón de piedra” (18). In addition to the affirmations of both disaffection and certainty of one’s ability to manipulate the relationship impersonally, the song’s narrator also adds the even more resolute: “No
tengo amor. / No soy el que debes conocer. / . . . / Mejor vete. / Mejor vete a tu casa.”

(18). Examining the lyrics of the song, it becomes clear that the narrator’s attitude towards a relationship with her (ella) is one of caution and distance. The song favors a complete separation at the end rather than the potential pain of a close relationship.

The short story begins when Estela calls Jaime to complain that he had not called her earlier. It is in this moment that the narrator also informs the reader that Estela and Jaime hooked up at a party in the house of Jaime’s second girlfriend, thus possibly alluding to the opening of the Rolling Stones song “He conocido a muchas niñas” (18). The conversation that follows is filled with charged pauses while the two make the agonizing small talk of two young lovers: “-Jaime… / ¿Qué? / ¿Me quieres mucho? / - Ya sabes que mucho. Te amo… ¿y tú? / Un silencio largo. Jaime dibujó un corazón, dentro escribió: Estela y Jaime. Con dos dedos, Estela detenía la puntita del cojín. / Tras un suspiro, Estela contestó: / -También” (20). From here, the conversation degenerates to the point where Estela accuses Jaime of seeing another woman and breaks off the relationship. Following the lyrics of the Rolling Stones song, the couple has gone from seeing something different in each other and the early stages of relationship (¿Qué es diferente en ella? / De verdad no sé) to a point of departure (No tengo amor / No soy el que debe conocerte). The short story ends with Jaime contemplating his relationship with Estela through the prism of his algebra homework:

Si las cosas del amor se resolvieran tan fácil como las ecuaciones de algebra. Si el amor se estudiara en libros. Porque él era A y ella era B y el resultado C era el amor; pero ahora, los factores habían cambiado. B era la incógnita a despejar. B=X. A+B=C. A=Jaime. C=Amor. B=X. / ¿Cuál es el valor de B? Si B es igual
Jaime reaches the conclusion that Estela is not the right girl for him, through both the logical mathematical calculations as well as through the presence of mass culture in the scene (the recurring “Bye, Bye Love”).

In *El rey Criollo*, García Saldaña shows how mass culture can be used to express the identity of a generation. In both the subject matter as well as the structure of the short stories, mass culture shows the superficiality of mass culture (for instance, “Bye, Bye Love”) as well as the rebelliousness and violence that it can contain (“El rey Criollo”). Mass culture above all else is a force that permeates life and as such, García Saldaña’s narration showing both the positive and the negative aspects, both resistance to society and domination by mass culture as José Agustín does in *La tumba*. In fact, mass culture in both works serves to emphasize the youth culture and to highlight the rebellious nature of this culture, a theme which Gustavo Sainz will also deal with in his introductory novel *Gazapo* (1965).

Published a year after *La tumba* and written contemporaneously with García Saldaña’s work on *El rey Criollo*, *Gazapo* also presents a youth culture of sex, alcohol and rock and roll. In contrast to *La tumba* and *El rey Criollo*, however, rock music is not as omnipresent as it is in the other two texts. In fact, implicit mass culture in *Gazapo* parallels what is found in *La tumba*: music is used to accentuate the defiance of youth. Menelao and the other protagonists listen to Ray Conniff, elemental North American big band figure, during their parties. This signals another important distinction between *Gazapo* and the novels of Agustín and García Saldaña. The mass culture that Sainz
speaks of is simply North American mass culture, not necessarily rock. Ray Conniff is a big band figure from an earlier time. North American mass culture, regardless of whether it is rock or other forms of popular music from the United States, is seen as a symbol of economic status. The inclusion of Ray Conniff accentuates the social class of the protagonists. They belong to the middle class and so their music for recreational consumption is going to be that of the North American culture industry. This foreign culture industry is such an omnipresent element of the youth culture that it invades linguistically their dialogue in the same way that La tumba’s Gabriel Guía incorporates “rocanrolear” into his vocabulary. At one point, Mauricio exclaims of a party, “[e]sto degenera en clásica rayconiffeada” (40), meaning that more couples are beginning to dance.

In addition to the music of Ray Conniff which is consumed collectively in public, Gazapo includes various instances of the culture industry as well as “high culture” within a private sphere. These musical intertexts generally serve as the soundtrack to seduction (or attempted seduction). Menelao plays the record of “Fantasía para un gentilhombre” by Spanish composer Joaquín Rodrigo as he lies beside Gisela, attempting to persuade her to give herself over to him. His seduction is even accentuated by the music. Menelao tells that “El disco iba en los Toques de la caballería de Nápoles y dejé de hablar para escuchar la melodía. Estiré mi mano hasta el vientre de Gisela. Se sobresaltó e impidió que la tocara” (36). The bellicose tone of the fanfare is complemented by Menelao’s own advances, but his sexual aspirations are rebuffed as the “cavalry” is forced to retreat. In another passage, Menelao puts on a bolero album as a seduction aid. The narration states, “[p]use Inolvidables, de Lucho Gatica y Arturo Castro en el tocadiscos y gradué
suavemente el volumen. Para crear atmósfera encendí velas y apagué la luz eléctrica. Trató de espiarla, pero no había encendido la luz del baño” (62). Clearly, Menelao uses not only lighting, but the romantic bolero from a previous generation to aid his seduction, and in this way mass culture is tied to sexuality. The more important element here, however, is that it does not matter what type of mass culture is used: that of high or popular culture, North American or Latin American culture. All of the mass culture references in the novel point to one thing, casual consumption and rejection of traditional values and societal systems – many times through sexuality.

An interesting counterpoint to the use of all the types of music as companions to a rejection of authority is a passage that outlines the protagonists’ use of a North American comic strip in translation. The narrator relates that,

en casa de Balmori. Él, Gisela y yo pegando letreritos de La pequeña Lulú en un cuadro de “La última cena.” San Pedro es ahora Pepe del Salto; Andrés, su hermano, Tobi; Judas, la bruja Ágata (cacle, cacle); San Juan, Alicia; Simón, el Señor Mota; Bartolomé, Gloria; Mateo, Fifí; Felipe le pregunta a Andrés: ¿Juras que no vas a arrojarme más bolas de nieve? Si no lo juras te espero a la salida. (161)

In this passage, the protagonists clearly subvert the idea of high culture with that of mass culture. By including comic strip dialogue in one of the bastions of high culture and of religious tradition, Da Vinci’s “The Last Supper,” Menelao, Gisela and Balmori undermine the authority of culture and of the church, and they choose to do this through mass culture. It is not a complete subversion, however. Although some of the apostles, Andrés for example as the leader of the boys club, do not completely fit within the
apostle paradigm as a homogenous group (as it appears in the last supper portrait at least),
all of the protagonists of the comic as well as the painting fit within some sort of scheme. It appears that Balmori and company leave Jesus alone and then give to all of the apostles besides Judas, the betrayer, fairly benign personalities. Judas, in contrast, is saddled with the villain of Lulú’s stories, la bruja Ágata, thus completing the good / bad paradigm. The only potential problem with this is the appearance of Tobi and members of his gang who many times compete against Lulú and her friends and who refuse to allow them to become a part of the gang. This complication is alleviated somewhat when one takes into consideration that in many cases Tobi and Lulú actually help each other and maintain a delicate friendship. What remains clear from the comic scene, is that the protagonists once again use mass culture to affect a partial subversion, but at the same time find that they must stay within certain parameters within this subversion. They cannot, for example, replace Jesus with a villain or Judas with a star protagonist.

In this way, as Agustín does with La tumba, Sainz is making a subtle statement about the very idea of cultural imperialism. Through the mixed use of Latin American and North American, high and mass culture in a way which minimizes or eliminates the differences, Sainz also subverts the very idea of one single Mexican culture. He implies that, whether it is good or bad, whether one wants to admit it or not, North American mass culture is just as much a part of certain Mexican experiences, especially middle to upper class Mexico, as is Joaquín Rodrigo, a factor in Spanish high culture. One cannot simply pick those elements of mass culture that one wants, which have to do specifically with Mexico and say that these things are Mexican culture. It is necessary to really examine what people are listening to, what is influencing them, and at this point in the
national identity building process, some Mexican youth were beginning to turn to North American mass culture as a mode of expression, and as a way of declaring their rebellious against the traditional Mexican establishment which places rigid societal mores on family and sexual practices.

Another of the important factors related to Gazapo is that this novel signals a subtle shift in the aesthetics of the Onda novels. As Carol Clark D’Lugo observes, Gazapo and other Onda novels focus on the fragmentation of the narrative discourse coupled with the questioning of the social discourse. That is to say, these novels start to demonstrate not just the conflicts involved in the generational gap, but also an aesthetic conflict that rejects the simplistic narrative style of the past, without descending into the complete experimentation of the 1920s avant-garde movements or the excesses of the Boom texts. Gazapo certainly contains multiple points of view that gives the novel a fragmented feel, and does so through the use of the tape recorder.

Mass culture as a way to create narrative tension and propel the narrative forward becomes very evident. Gazapo provides an interesting reflection on the process of mass culture through the various protagonists’ use of the tape recorder. Although it is not mass culture itself, the tape recorder can be seen as a loose metaphor for mass culture as a part of the technology that the culture industry manipulates. It also provides a forum for an exploration into the processes involved in creating it. The tape recorder in the novel provides a narrative structure, guiding it from the beginning and helping to propel it and to fill in voids. As Carol Clark D’Lugo explains, the tape recorder combined with letter, diaries, and other forms of oral storytelling, gives the novel a sense of fragmentation (Fragmented Novel 166). Above all, the tape recorder serves to emphasize the “fictional”
or at least distanced nature of the text, something that follows from the various definitions of the title, gazapo, that appears as an epigraph at the beginning of the novel. Thus, the tape recorder serves to question the validity of the narration being told, emphasizing the idea of multiple stories as opposed to an absolute story. D’Lugo notes that, “in Gazapo, all is filtered through Menelao’s consciousness” (Fragmented Novel 168), and so the reader / receptor has to sift through the already filtered version that Menelao relates to attempt to put together the “actual” story. The very possibility of multiple versions is apparent from the very first reference to the tape recorder. Talking about a fight with a rival, Tricardio, one of the protagonists relates that Mauricio “[g]rabó dos versiones. Y la más breve te la puedo decir igualita porque ayer estuvimos toda la tarde oyendo la cinta” (23). This passage underlines two important points. The first, that even immediately after the event being related, there are now two potential versions that have been recorded as well as the infinite number that are in the memories of those who experienced the events. The second point is that the “mass media,” that is the recorded version, is the one that will pass on into “history” or the collective memory. Indeed, the speaker relates that he can even now recite word for word the shorter version of events, thus giving this version more weight. Mass culture in this way can also be connected with the idea of a control paradigm that will influence what comes to be considered the “truth.” The mass media keeps a record of the events that took place and to those who were not present this recording will become the only truth available. Mass culture dominates the way that the individual (or the masses) view the world; it dictates their perception and interpretation of events.
In addition to the idea that the tapes as symbols of mass culture serve to delineate the filtered or official truth as opposed to a subjective idea of truth comes the related topic of the multiplicity of mediums that have the same function. Menelao reflects upon a recording he made of a visit to his father’s factory. He states:

El domingo oí por tercera vez la cinta donde narro el último encuentro con mi padre . . . Llevaba el diario de Gisela y el mío. Los leía comparándolos en un despacho mientras mi padre (un rostro y un cuerpo desmesurados, unas manos sucias de nicotina), enfrentado a su jefe (como a un espejo concave), ordenaba unas facturas. La cinta dice que yo leía. / Y en el diario se lee: . . . (25)

Here the text reflects the recording and vice versa in a web of interdependence. This symbiosis is emphasized even more by the narrator’s use of the concave mirror metaphor in talking about his father and his father’s boss. Just as Menelao’s father reflects a distorted vision of his boss, so the recording reflects a distorted version of the text being read. It is a state of mutual necessity, however, for the understanding of the text comes from the recording; that is, the narration refers the act of reading only through the use of the recording. This is certainly not the only example of the relationship between text and technology in the novel.

In an inverse versión de la factory passage, another section begins with “[t]exto garrapateado en las últimas páginas de un cuaderno de papel milimétrico, y grabado después” (54). This passage recognizes the importance of a text for the mass media representation. Just as a movie or television show has a script, or a song has a score, Menelao and company’s recordings have a text to them as well. Although the text is important, the end result as an actual recording is the most important element. In another
passage, the narrator recognizes the differences that come with the production of mass media as differentiated from “real” interaction: “[m]ás tarde, lee frente a la grabadora, con la voz especial que usa para leer” (81). The protagonists consciously distinguish between “real” interaction and mass media interaction, and their very language and tone is modified to accommodate this difference.

The final function that the recordings have in the novel is a way of chronicling and then understanding the protagonist’s surroundings. They use the tape recorder as a way of observing and filtering their life experiences. The tape recorder can be taken as a symbol of the means of mass communication which facilitate mass culture, although it does not pertain to mass culture itself and there are significant differences between the recordings that the friends make and the actual effect of mass culture. The protagonists of Gazapo utilize the tape recorder as a means of artistic and pseudo-historical creation.

In one instance, Menelao and Gisela use the tape recorder to observe the reaction of Gisela’s father when he arrives at Menelao’s apartment. Mass culture in this case becomes a way of observing what one cannot observe directly; that is, a way of understanding the world from a distance. The tape recorder functions as an instrument of understanding the world, to such an extent that its use becomes omnipresent. This is evident in the following passage: “[s]e despide. Al llegar al departamento estaba sonando el teléfono y era él. Enciendo la grabadora y pongo una cinta. / -Gisela camina sin estilo – comienza el aparato. / Suena el teléfono otra vez y corro a la recámara. Es Arnaldo. La grabadora sigue: . . .” (121). Here Menelao first is returning to an earlier recording, and cannot even pause the process of remembering to directly interact with Arnaldo. In another passage, Menelao also mentions the use of the tape recorder as a
way of remembering. Menelao begins by stating that, “[b]ueno te voy a contar lo de hoy y de pasada lo grabo. ¿Okey? . . . . / Tocan en la puerta con nuestra clave. / -Deja, yo voy a abrir –digo. Conecto el micrófono para grabar todo” (158). Once again, the tape recorder is a way of capturing both memories as well as more immediate experiences.

Eric Gould has proposed that both mirrors and the tape recorder in Gazapo serve as a part of the constructions of the Self. He states that, “[b]ecause they appear to capture exact, objective documentation of the subject, tape recordings are an important tool in Menelao’s attempts to construct a serviceable self-image” (67). It should be pointed out that this self-image is not always based on the reality of events, but at times on the perception of events. In other words, the tape recorder serves as a filter for reality, recording for interpretation the experiences that will make up the truth and identity for the different protagonists. Thus, Gazapo demonstrates the possibility that the means of producing mass culture can be used to reinterpret or to highlight a certain interpretation of events.

The use of the tape recorder in Gazapo brings up another consideration, that of the masses as critic. As Walter Benjamin theorized, the ability to reproduce works of art for the masses makes critics of the masses. Gazapo shows that the ability to reproduce an art work or text can indeed make artists (narrators) of the masses. Mass culture, in this sense, elevates the masses to the authorial position of creators. What these characters choose to record, however, also reflects the youth culture omnipresent in La tumba. Sainz’s protagonists worry about sex and abuse alcohol. They are characters with no strong ties who participate in endless parties. The recordings as a symbol of mass culture, and to a lesser extent the direct mass culture in the form of the music that the
characters listen to, highlight the barrier between the establishment (the generation of the character’s parents) and the counterculture. Menelao and his friends use the tape recorder as a way of editorializing their experiences and as a form of protest or resistance to authority. Mass culture works as a democratizing force of resistance in this case.

A brief look at some of José Agustín’s other texts provides a good point of departure to see how his style becomes more experimental towards the end of the 60’s and the beginning of the 70’s. His works, Inventando que sueño (1968) and Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna) (1973) center around an environment of sex, drugs and rock and roll, as occurs in La tumba. In the same way, these texts use mass culture as an identifying artifact. Mass culture, that is, rock and roll, combined with a casual attitude towards sex and participation in the drug culture make the protagonists who they are.

Although it does not really add more to the dynamic of youth culture prevalent in La tumba, the collection of short stories, Inventando que sueño manifests greater experimentation in narrative technique. While La tumba’s narration is fairly lineal without much complexity, the “resistance” of the text residing in thematics rather than form, Agustín begins to experiment with a modern narrative style in this later collection.

Not all stories in this collection contain a subversion of traditional narrative techniques. The first story, “Es que vivió en Francia,” is a very basic, straightforward tale of a film star who lives in France. The topic of the short story certainly connects with the ideas found in La tumba about mass culture. The protagonist talks of her upbringing and the importance of mass culture for her own development. As in La tumba, there is an ironic subtext in her reflections on mass culture. She states at one point that, “[n]o pienso permitir que la celebridad se me suba a la cabeza, aunque haya
Although she tries to distance herself from the stereotype of the pompous celebrity, this very attitude filters into her dialogue. She cannot help but accept the elevated vision of others about her, but always maintains the pretence of distance. Another passage shows the protagonist exclaiming that, “[a]lguien aseguraba que tengo sex appeal” (19). Her sense of worth comes from her reception by others, which includes her nomination for an Oscar. The other factor of mass culture in this short story is the narration that shows the superficiality of the protagonist. In talking about wealth, she exclaims that, “[j]amás podré ser rica, odio el dinero: / sólo es un medio para adquirir las cosas que deseo: libros, discos, cuadros, pero ni eso: doy la mitad de lo que gano a mi productor, otra parte al fisco” (19). The international film star, world renowned nominee for the Oscar, complains that her producer takes his share of her earnings. Wealth, for the protagonist, is only a means of acquiring goods and so she has the luxury of expressing her dislike for money in a way only those who have it can. This short story takes the opportunity to examine mass culture from the production standpoint and point out the superficiality that can result from mass culture celebrity. It is not necessarily inherent worth that makes one a celebrity, but rather a series of fortuitous events and those who have celebrity should not feel inordinately superior. While the short story examines mass culture in a way that complements La tumba, Agustín does not complicate the narration in this text.

The short story from which Glantz takes the name Onda, “Cual es la Onda” is a better example of how Agustín fuses text and form. The short story begins with an allusion to this: “Show me the way to the next whisky bar. And don’t ask why. Show
me the way to the next whisky bar. I tell you we must die.’ – Bertolt Brecht y Kurt Weill según the Doors” (55). In referring to the fact that the Doors appropriate the song from an opera by Brecht with music by Weill, Agustín introduces the idea that mass culture produce a fusion of so-called high and popular culture both in form and in content. The short story continues to tell of drummer Oliveira’s attempts to seduce Requelle. The connection between the Oliveira of Agustín’s story and the protagonist of Cortázar’s Rayuela has been noted by many critics, and the narrator himself suggests this in stating, “Requeya, Reyuela, Rayuela, hijo de Cortázar; además de ser el amo con la batería, sé tocar guitarra rickenbaker . . .” (80). Thus, as the Doors appropriate Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, Agustín appropriates both the protagonist as well as a spirit of narrative experimentation from Rayuela. The short story plays around with the text on the page, at times indenting or pushing the text to the right of the page, and at other times pushing the words horizontally up the page from the bottom, as if the narration had run out of room. Santiago Vaquera explains the textual variation as another manifestation of the itinerant wandering of the protagonists. Through both structural and thematic wandering, the short story “construye y constituye una visión de la ciudad como un no-lugar en donde varias fronteras se enfrentan y se transgreden” (440). The destabilization of the narrative also determinitalizes the city according to Santiago Vaquera and thus gives a space for “reterritorializar una visión relevante y particular para los jóvenes urbanos de la década de los sesenta” (445). The wandering text, which could be thought of as a textual jazz or rock improvisation, gives the narrative a space in which to question urban, even national, limits.
In addition to the physical experimentation, which is complemented by a fragmentary narrative, the short story also experiments with linguistic register, phasing between specific youth jargon and mixed language passages (“No no no, viejecín, out las payasadas y explica: cómo llegasta a baterista si deveras quieres a tu fammy” (69)) to passages in French, to a more official discourse that avoids jargon. This linguistic game is emphasized at the end of the story, when Oliveira is approached by the police. Oliveira states that Requelle is his sister, to which the policeman responds, “Cómo que su hermano, no diga esas cosas o le va pior” (85). The irony of this passage is that Oliveira, who certainly does not use a pure linguistic register responds by correcting the policeman, to which the narrator adds, “permitiendo que la Academia de la Lengua suspire con alivio” (85). Agustín highlights his parodic use of the narration and linguistic registers through his explicit attention to them in the text. Oliveira is not the only one to comment on this in the text; the narrator cannot help but note the inconsistent language of the protagonist. For instance, the narrator inserts the comment, “[n]ótese la ausencia del habitual e incorrecto: se sentó” (84) when the narration explains that “Requelle tomó asiento” (84). This both alludes to the fictitious nature of the text as well as the explicit intention of the text to draw attention to these linguistic differences. In addition to the narrator, the text also includes comments from a linotypist and a translator. Regarding the various “authors” of the text, Santiago Vaquera comments that, “Estos otros ‘autores’ ayudan al narrador ficticio a narrar el cuento. La ‘realidad’ del relato se vuelve ilusoria” (451), and Juan Bruce-Novoa claims that, “the author keeps interrupting with Brechtian-style asides to call attention to the staged quality of what we are reading and to the fact that the actors are playing roles. We should not empathize, but rather we should distance
ourselves, judge what we see, and then apply our new knowledge to the real world” (52-53). The text, then, provides a discussion of la Onda which enables the reader to see the potential absurdity of the rock subculture through the exaggeration of the plot, but also through the shifting levels of destabilized narrative authority.

The final short story, “Amor del bueno” opens with a party to which the mother has hired both a rock group and an orchestra. This allows the narrator to examine the social assumptions about rock music in the context of middle class Mexican society. The child-narrator explains that,

Aún no llegan el conjunto de rock y la orquesta que se contrataron con varios días de anticipación, lo cual es normal porque dice mi papá que todos los músicos son unos incumplidos, nomás van a las pachangas a ver si pueden empedarse. Sobre todo los conjuntos de rock, bola de melenudos que parecen maricones, nomás pierden el tiempo en vez de estudiar algo que sirva. (119-120)

The narrator’s father emphasizes rock music as a corrupting force. Musicians in general, and rock musicians especially, are a worthless sector of society who dedicate themselves to music because they cannot do anything else. His mother, in contrast, sees the modernizing element of rock music. The narrator explains that, “[ella] fue la de la idea de contratar a un conjunto de rock, porque dice que así se acostumbra ahora en lo social” (120). Rock groups are the “in” thing to have at parties of a certain social status as a symbol of upward social mobility. Thus, the polemic over the rock group at the party spans the range of approaches to rock music in Mexico at the time; it is either a debilitating, destructive imperialist force, or it is a symbol of modernization.
The attitudes of the parents is enriched by the narrator’s observation about the traditional orchestra. He complains that:

Deberían empezar por fusilar a estos verracos de la orquesta: aparte de mensos se ven re cochinotes. Pero en fin. ¡En la madre!, a la mejor van a querer rapar a los conjuntos de rock. Eso sí estaría horrible porque la mera verdad cuando sea grande aguantaría tener mi conjunto y melena y arrancarme con la guitarra y con diablo con vestido vestido vestido diablo con vestido azuuuuul. (121)

His father’s distaste for rock music and his mother’s connection of rock with social status and modernization is transformed into the child’s desire to be a rock star. Agustín’s narrator has internalized the cultural value of the rock star and sees in the blue suit and guitar the means of success. For the narrator, rock music is a form of rebellion against the sensibilities of his parents, neither of whom would hope to have their son become a rocker. This sensibility is further emphasized when the rock group finally arrives and replaces the traditional orchestra. The narrator describes the “regocijo absoluto de los jóvenes, quienes infestan la pista y bailan al compás del ritmo frenético del conjunto” (141). Not only do the young people celebrate the arrival of the rock group, but the narrator’s language implies violence and force. They infest the dance floor and dance frenetically.

If this were its only connection to mass culture, this story would not add much to the discussion of mass culture in Agustín’s work. Agustín, however, uses mass culture as a narrative technique in the short story to destabilize traditional narrative patterns. The subtitle of the fourth act, “Juego de los puntos de vista” (115), gives an indication of how to read “Amor del Bueno.” It is an exercise in shifting point of view, and mass culture
plays a large roll in this. The narration starts out in a fairly traditional manner, a first person narrator telling the story of the party. This narration is soon interrupted by the title, “Amor del bueno, alegoría en un acto” (118), and a list of characters but soon returns to the first person narrative. The title and the list of characters allude to the shifting narrative technique that the narration will undergo, from traditional narrative to a more theatrical style. Slowly, a sense of being a script invades the text. The narration is no longer in paragraph format, but in dialogue. In addition, the text is transforming itself into a movie script. It even reflects the very artificial nature of its own composition: “Voz director (off): No te desafines, por favor. Espero que no hayan sido en balde las cuatro horas de ensayo de hoy. / Actor que encarna a Leopoldo: Confíe en mí, señor” (123). At this point in the narration, the text is the script of the actual filming of the story, emphasizing that both the story of Leopoldo as well as the story of the filming of Leopoldo’s tale are both works of fiction. The aura of film script continues throughout the story, with passages that explicitly connect the narration with film technique, “CLOSE UP DE LA NIÑA ASUSTADA ANTES DE ALEJARSE HASTA FULL DE LAS DOS FAMILIAS, CON LOS NOVIOS ENCUADRADOS EN EL CENTRO. / MÚSICA MUY SUAVE Y CONVENCIONAL QUE VIENE DEL TOCADISCOS” (129). The script pays attention to all of the necessary details for filming, from the visual effect to the importance of music for the tone of the scene.

One way of looking at the inclusion of movie script in Agustín’s story is as an appropriation of mass culture. Rather than mass culture dominating thought and ideology, Agustín’s text appropriates mass culture in order to renovate narrative technique. Mass culture in “Amor del bueno” can be seen as an alternative answer to
simplistic narrative styles, which helps form a modern, fragmented, multifaceted aesthetic.\textsuperscript{37}

In a tour de force of inconclusive narration and modern narrative technique, \textit{Se está haciendo tarde}, is an impressionistic vision of the Mexican counterculture of the late 60’s and early 70’s which explores the drug and music scene in Acapulco after it became a popular resort for North American tourists. Rather than a novel in the traditional sense, \textit{Se está haciendo tarde} is more of a tedious experiment with a variety of narrative styles and techniques; nothing really seems to happen. It is this apparent lack of narrative development or plot that inspires Raymond L. Williams to label the work a poster. Williams explains that “[l]ike posters, their [the Onda writers’] novels demonstrate neither the pretension nor the intention of becoming ‘classic’ objects of art. They are successful to the extent that they can create an immediate experience” (“Novel as Poster” 68). This immediate experience that Williams talks of is comprised of drugs, sex, alcohol, pop versions of eastern religions and mystical fortune telling, and of course rock music. In fact, the whole plot revolves around a group of Mexican youth who follow two middle aged North American tourists from one scene of erotic drug induced revelry to another. Mass culture in the novel, paired with the other outward symbols of the counterculture, is just one more signifier for the youth culture that wanders without direction or ambition, and as that does not differ greatly from the novels already discussed.

However, it does more than just imply counterculture. It also adds to the existential angst present in the novel. In a novel that is mostly devoid of a sense of time, mass culture provides a way of noting the passage of time. The protagonist, Virgilio, in
multiple occasions mentions his surprise at finding that one album has given way to another: “en el departamento contiguo, más música, Get Yer Ya-Ya’s Out: Rolling Stones, ¿a qué horas lo cambiaron? ¿A qué horas pasa el tiempo? ¿Por qué tengo la impresión de que el tiempo se va de mis manos irremediablemente, sin que me dé cuenta, y pierdo así momentos de oro, en los cuales podría hacer algo que debería hacer” (107-108). The changing of albums marks time as well as negates it. That the protagonists do not notice the passage of time except through the mass culture that they are consuming emphasizes the sense of vagueness and tedium that the novel, as “poster,” is looking to convey. Life within the novel is a vacuum and the protagonists are stuck in a continuous circle of timeless boredom through their dependence on drugs and a counterculture ideology. Virgilio recognizes the futility of his existence but hopes for more. Susan Schaffer explains that the text becomes a “source of intoxication for the reader” (137), paralleling the drug use in the text. She continues by stating that, “Agustín accomplishes this by manipulating the discourse so that the reader feels disoriented. Using lyrics from a Beatles’ song as a model – ‘Your outside is in / Your inside is out / The higher you fly / The deeper you go’ – the author employs numerous innovative literary techniques to throw the reader off balance” (138). Agustín’s drug aesthetic combines with mass culture to give the sense of disorientation or intoxication that Schaffer notices, and in doing so helps shape an experimental narrative style. Above all, mass culture serves to punctuate the theme of complete resistance to middle class Mexican norms that the protagonists experience. Life for them is meaningless and the inclusion of mass culture only accentuates the feelings of insignificance that Virgilio experiences.
Agustín’s later works tend towards more narrative experimentation, getting away from the simplistic style of *La tumba*. Agustín pays even more attention to language and structure in constructing his later novels. This trend finds its parallel in the work of García Saldaña as well. *Pasto verde* (1968) by García Saldaña offers a schizophrenic vision of the Onda experience. This novel, if one could call it that, approaches the French roman nouveau and the style of North American beat poet, Allen Ginsberg as exemplified in his long poem “Howl.” Stylistically complex and thematically diverse, *Pasto verde* gives the reader what José Agustín characterizes as “un caso único en la literatura mexicana, por lo catártico y libre; en su naturaleza cabe todo tipo de exceso, y eso hace que la lectura a veces se arrastre, pero en general es un libro que reta al lector y que lo obliga, en cierta forma, a vencerse a sí mismo. Por una parte deja claro lo que para él era la onda, sus mitos, sus héroes, sus modos de ser” (*Contracultura* 144). *Pasto verde* explores the themes of counterculture and mass culture, high and low culture through a web of narrative fragmentation and experimentation.

In the beginning of *Pasto verde*, the narrator provides an interesting insight into his consumption of rock music (specifically the Rolling Stones and the Beatles) and his mode of expression, when he states:

sé donde está el blanco en este Paraísodelanada y trataré diario de ser como no fui ayer y trataré de no ser como los demás y por eso hoy uso lentes oscuros nada más para distinguirme y por eso uso botas de cuero con barro para no olvidarme del camino andado y por eso escucho discos de los Rolling Stones y los Beatles para no confundirme con la gente fresa y para no confundirme con la gente cuadrada uso la melena abultada y nena recuerda que de tu situación tus papás no
tienen la culpa de nada nada más que tú debes de saber quién decide tu vida si la estulticia o la calma si el nuevo Bravo mundo o la decadencia yo no soy del pri porque las instituciones me enferman. (31)

The narrator, Epicuro, offers a vision of the rock counterculture movement here as exactly that, a counter or sub culture, through the rejection of traditional social institutions and the political power of the PRI. The way he dresses and the music he listens to are simply manifestations of his participation within the countercultural community and his rejection of the “establishment” community. Taste in this case is dictated by the cultural environment and social / cultural status.

For Epicuro, his status as countercultural / rock and roll figure is far more important than his interpersonal relations; it is an integral part of who he is and cannot be discarded lightly. Our narrator is a writer, but also the front man for a rock and roll band modeled after his North American rock heroes. He describes a typical day thus, “siempre voy a la prepa vestido con camisas de colores eléctricos, pantalones rosas chachachá de bolsas charras, y zapatos blancos, uso una melena abultada a la Little Richard, casi nunca entro a clases por estar con la guitarra rocanroleando las canciones que canta Presley . . . Perder mi facha rocanrolera nunca” (139). Later, speaking of his problems with his girlfriend, Epicuro complains:

¿Qué puedo hacer cuando mi amor me ha roto en mil pedazos el corazón?

¿Cuándo me dejó por mi tipo rock? ¿Qué puedo hacer cuando mi amor otra vez se ha ido? Tirarme al vicio o dedicarme de lleno al rocanroleo. Y para demostrarle a Escuerina Freud que aunque la quiero el cortón no me dolió,
organizo un té danzante y formo un conjunto de rock Maese Epic Aris y sus Floreros Despostillados. (142)

Even though he still likes his girlfriend, he will not give up his rock lifestyle for her, and instead he resolves to form a rock band thus recognizing his rejection of middle class values (relationships which turn into matrimony) through the counterculture values of rock.

In addition to rock being an important part of the culture in which Epicuro participates, (a fact that echoes the use of mass culture in La tumba or Gazapo), it also offers him a way of judging his world. He gives a list of those “en la onda,” including groups and artists like Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.

Later, Epicuro states that the onda is “[t]odos hablando de lo mismo que tú cotorreas en De Lado. De lo que habla aquí tu padre, El Maese Quevedo. De lo que hablan los negros en el rhythm blues, los blancos en el rock. Todos los de la onda maese, así es ...” (56).

The Onda, philosophically, is that which unites disparate groups under one label. The Onda, through music, can become a way to foster understanding and solidarity, a fact that Epicuro recognizes; he directly unites his brand of rock music with Marxism.

Revolution is the key to Epicuro’s personal vision of the world. For him, the world needs a revolution on many different levels: the social, the political, the cultural, the sexual, etc. It is through mass culture that Epicuro can envision this revolution. At one point, Epicuro reflects on the Mexican Revolution, stating:

Gracias por la herencia de este Mexiquito tan revolucionario, gracias Pancho Villa, gracias Zapata, gracias gracias, qué bonita tierra nos dejaron, qué patria tan bella, gracias, todos los mexicanos estamos muy contentos, gracias a ustedes, los
pobres de aquí desaparecieron. ¡Viva la Revolución! Pero a veces sueño que
Pancho Villa está otra vez en la Sierra. . . ¡Sabor ahí! / no colors anymore/ i want
them to turn black . . . (116)

The revolutionary aspirations of the protagonist, claiming the symbolic heritage of the
great revolutionaries of the Mexican Revolution, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, is
punctuated at the end with the lyrics of the Rolling Stone’s “Paint it Black.” Epicuro’s
counterculture seeks to revalidate the revolutionary heroes and rescue them from the
sanitary pantheon of heroes to which the PRI and official Mexican mythology has
relegated them. It finds its most accurate mode of expression in the foreign culture
industry.38 It is also through this connection that Epicuro can insert himself within the
larger, global counterculture.

In this way, the culture industry and mass culture function as a mode of political
as well as personal expression. In another delirious passage, Epicuro offers his personal
vision of his group, los Dientes Macizos and the cultural baggage that goes along with it:

Dalia Marina y Angélica cantan You’ve lost that lovin feelin’, las Tanías
bailando. Los Dientes Macizos cantando Lady Jane en un bosque. Imágenes
alternadas de Dalia Marina y Angélica cantando Going Out of my Head. Una
familia de los treintas yendo a misa. Un mitin político. Los Dientes Macizos en
una reunión adorando a Quetzalcóatl. Marx posando con su libro La Sagrada
Familia. Engels con La Familia. La Propiedad Privada y El Estado. Lenin con
La Emancipación de la Mujer. Los Dientes Macizos cantando Let’s spend the
night togehter. San Carlos Fuentes y San Carlos Monsiváis vestidos de Quevedos
sobre unos pilares en el fondo de la escena donde Dalia Marina canta / going out of my head. (43)

Here, Epicuro provides a series of contrary pairings, explicitly connecting the culture industry and rock music with Marxism, international imagery with Mexican and urban scenery with more organic natural scenery. He sprinkles his thoughts with fragments of popular foreign mass culture songs from the Rolling Stones and the Righteous Brothers, as well as with Marx, Engels and Lenin and goes from the Rolling Stones in the forest to a political rally that elevates that most national of symbols, the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl.³⁹ Also included are the intellectual figures, Carlos Fuentes as a symbol of the literary and political establishment and Carlos Monsiváis as a voice of the leftist intellectual elite.

Above all, mass culture and revolutionary thoughts somehow fuse in the novel to promote a vision of resistance to societal norms (or the Establishment). García Saldaña revels in the nonconformity of rock music and somehow finds a way of marrying the incompatible revolutionary message of a highly capitalist culture industry with his own socialist ideology to communicate the ability of both of these for resistance. It is a rebellion that appears to be more a critique of the Establishment than a strong anti-capitalist ideology. In choosing the Rolling Stones to promote his socialist ideology, Epicuro favors the edgy rebellious image that the culture industry supports over the capitalist infrastructure of rock music. By fostering a “bad boy” image of the rock group, the culture industry is able to camouflage the importance of the market, and so Epicuro becomes a victim of manipulation, literally buying into a system which he claims he would like to bring down.
Recognizing the highly capitalist nature of the mass culture employed in the novels, the debate about cultural imperialism must also be considered. All of these texts, whether directly or indirectly, must address the idea of cultural imperialism simply because of their pronounced inclusion of products of the North American culture industry. Implicitly, these texts question the cultural imperialist criticism that Moníséis and others propose, assessing whether it is a positive or a negative phenomenon.

American mass culture was a part of the Mexican youth culture in the 1960s, and the Onda authors merely incorporated that reality into their fiction, portraying a true image of what certain Mexican youth experienced rather than trying to make their fiction ultra-Mexican. José Agustín argues that, “[a]lgunos también incorporamos referencias o herramientas del cine, rock, televisión, ‘comics’, fantasía, sueños, visiones, novela negra y ciencia ficción. En general hubo una reinserción en la cultura popular mexicana, aunque esto tardó en notarse, pues en un principio se vio como desnacionalización o transculturación” (“Onda” 10). Film, rock, television, in short, products of the culture industry, all form a part of the national identity in Mexico in the 1960s. Criticism that the Onda texts include these factors ignore the very nature of the youth experience.

Another way of looking at the inclusion of mass culture from the cultural imperialist perspective is to see mass culture as a way of questioning of the idea of national identity. These writers rejected the rigid terms of Mexican identity constructed by the PRI through the use of national heroes. As Eric Zolov commented, mass culture and rock and roll icons “not only offered new role models at home but immediately overshadowed the official heroes of the Revolution, whose own exaggerated masculinities had become an extension of the patriarchal state” (28). Exploring mass
culture, then, became a part of exploring the idea of Mexican identity. More specifically, American mass culture, which could be seen as a foreign invasion, was also a way of resisting the controlling power of the political definition of national identity. It is a way of expanding the scope of identity in order to encompass a more complete view of society as a whole.

Another Onda author to whom these questions of national identity are very important is Héctor Manjarrez. In his writings, he immerses himself in mass culture, but provides an interesting contrast and comparison with the rock and roll ethos of Agustín, Sainz and García Saldaña. Manjarrez sees mass culture as a force of domination and thus as a threat to Mexican culture. One of his first works, *Acto propiciatorio* (1970), contains a story that could be seen as an exploration into mass culture and its impact on the more entrenched idea of national culture. In the first story of the collection, “Johnny,” the protagonist of a North American Western leaves the television set to live with a Mexican family that has been consuming the program. The obvious metaphor of North American mass culture literally invading Mexican family life could not be clearer. It is interesting, however, to examine how the perception of Johnny changes from his introduction into the family to the conclusion of the short story.

Once Johnny revives from the unconsciousness brought about by his literally falling from a Western TV show through the television screen into the family’s living room, he is invited to dine with the Zendejas family. The general attitude towards Johnny is one of respect and even awe: Gonzalo Zendejas, the proud businessman, gives his own spot at the table to Johnny and the whole family exhorts the younger son, Jorge, to address “Mr. Miles” as Ud. and not tú. Johnny is a figure of prestige for the family,
and as such should be treated accordingly. In fact, Johnny elevates the family to a place of honor in the sensationalist tabloids. While they appreciate the fame that Johnny gives them, they also have ambivalent feelings about sharing him with the wider world. The narrator explains that, “[l]a envidia y la admiración de la gente por Johnny los había molestado más, a fin de cuentas, de lo que los había enorgullecido. Sin por ello ser posesivos, querían a Johnny para ellos mismos, para escucharlo; mientras menos gente supiera de su existencia, mejor” (22-23). This desire to keep Johnny to themselves is also related to what he represents for them, North American privilege at its best. Not only is Johnny a part of the North American mass culture industry, he is a tangible representation of this, a mark of exclusivity. Johnny’s position as a part of a Western series ties into what Efrén Ballesteros, a family friend, explains on meeting Johnny: “los Estados Unidos son la patria de la luz, de la televisión, del automóvil, de la comida enlatada, de la carne refrigerada, del supermercado” (23). The US is equated with the consumer culture and the ability to consume is equated with upward social mobility and affluence. The relationship that the Zandejas family maintains with Johnny is therefore one of a jealous consumer who buys in completely to the market mentality; if they can keep Johnny to themselves, then he is “worth” more than if he is shared with the entire nation. The need for exclusivity (on both the Zandeja’s part, but also it must be noted on Johnny’s part too), is taken to such an extent that the family moves to a new unlisted address and the father is looking into legally adopting Johnny.

Everything changes, however, when the family discovers that Mariana, the daughter, is pregnant. This act destroys the Zandejas family’s carefully constructed world and the rapid switch in perception is clearly noted in his wife’s diatribe against the
cowboy: Johnny goes from being a potential son in law for Mrs. Zandejas to a source of hate and frustration: “[e]sos cowboys no son sino salvajes, bestias. ¿Quién cree ser? ¿Eh? ¿Acaso piensa que esto es un rancho? Ésta era una casa respectable y feliz hasta su llegada. ¿Me oyes?” (34). For his part, Gonzalo cannot reconcile himself to the switch in his perception of Johnny: the switch from benign novelty to threat. As the narrator states, “mira [a las pistolas de Johnny] brevemente . . . sin pensar en nada, sabiendo lo que va a hacer, sabiendo que no puede hacer otra cosa, sabiendo que ya no puede regresar a leer su periódico con toda tranquilidad; y lo hará no porque se trata del ‘honor’ de su hija, que no tiene el menor peso en este domingo que quería pasar en calma, sino porque no ve qué otra cosa puede hacer” (36). Johnny’s sin is not necessarily that he has dishonored Mariana, although that certainly is a catalyst, but rather that it changes Gonzalo’s perception of mass culture. Gonzalo originally considered Johnny the spokesman for mass culture, a benign, innocent and even helpful figure. Gonzalo even seriously considered making the connection with him permanent, but the impregnation of his daughter by Johnny opens Gonzalo’s eyes to the full potential of mass culture. This pregnancy offers a very direct correlation with cultural imperialism. The outsider infiltrates and takes over national culture; the sexual possession which culminates in the pregnancy of Gonzalo’s daughter is a clear metaphor for domination by North American mass culture which will self propagate. If Mexican youth buy into the foreign culture industry, they will pass their preference for it on to their own children. In this “new world,” mass culture has the potential for great good, but it also has the potential to influence dramatically those who consume it. Mass culture becomes a more real, multifaceted phenomenon this way, leaving behind the simple maniqueism of before:
mass culture is equated with development and social ascendancy, therefore mass culture is seen as positive change. It is because of the fundamental change that Johnny has brought to Gonzalo’s perception that Gonzalo decides to shoot and kill him. Ironically, Gonzalo’s rejection of mass culture by killing Johnny takes the form of a Western serial shootout in which both parties face off with pistols.

Another role played by mass culture in the story is that of sensationalizing Johnny. The explanations for his existence transcend the scope from conspiracy theory to the far-fetched and bizarre: from rumors of being a CIA agent to the possibility of a public relations ploy by the PRI. Even the government gets involved, trying to wade through the complex immigration issues surrounding Johnny: “¿conflicto de leyes? ¿estancia en el país sin haber obtenido una tarjeta de turista? ¿inmigración sin papeles de inmigrante que nunca pasó por la frontera? ¿inversionista americano de Hollywood? o ¿beatnik indeseable y carente de moral?” (20). It is interesting that the reflections of both the media as well as the government show the spectrum of stereotypical behavior. Something so strange has to be either a clever government ploy by either the North American or Mexican government (depending upon one’s political ideology). A strange cowboy who turns up unexpectedly in the midst of middle class Mexico has to be either a capitalist looking to further dominate the Mexican mass culture industry or another threat to the national identity, a drug addicted beatnik who brings nothing but loose morals and trouble.

The mass media within the short story take on the same issues with which the Zendejas family struggles, that is, the effect of North American mass culture on Mexican society. The only difference between the two is that the mass media soon forget Johnny
and move on to other issues, while the Zendejas family is stuck with Johnny in a more permanent fashion. The effects of cultural imperialism are concrete and can be hard to eliminate. The narrator relates that

Johnny advirtió con rapidez que nadie otorgaba verdadera importancia a la cuestión de si el cowboy era un fraude o no; todo el mundo especulaba sobre ello, pero sin que el esclarecimiento de su origen llegase a ser el objeto real de tales inquisiciones y discursos, pues trataba, por encima de todo, de hablar y disertar de lo que hoy por hoy estaba en boga . . . Los más álgidos adversarios, los más violentos negadores de su legitimidad, lo olvidaron cuando los espías suplantaron a los cowboys en la escala de popularidad, cuando el espionaje relegó al western.

(19-20)

Johnny and his place in the media outlets are the perfect mass culture example of the mass culture as societal escape valve, in other words, mass culture as mass deception framework. While the citizens worried themselves about issues of cultural imperialism or the ramifications of Johnny’s very existence, their reflections stayed on the level of mere superficial gossiping. The media takes a potentially serious topic and debases it, giving critics and advocates alike a forum for releasing potentially harmful pressure. The other side of Johnny’s observation is the short time that it takes for the spy show to replace the Western. As an instrument of social control, the mass media places Johnny in the spotlight just long enough to make him an interesting oddity, but they do not keep him in the spotlight long enough to make him a real concern.

In another of Manjarrez’s works, Lapsus (1971), the author returns to the topic of mass culture as a part of his exploration of Mexican identity. In keeping with his
cautionary vision of Acto propicio, Manjarrez seeks to justify literature in a world inundated with mass culture. At one point, he asks, “¿Para qué demonios escribir novelas cuando es notorio que hace muchos años que no hay una sola novela que haya cambiado el mundo aunque sea un poco . . . cuando una película de Godard (digamos) y una canción de Mick Jagger (digamos) transforman a muchísima más gente?” (217-218).

This direct dialogue with mass culture provides a forum as well as a separation between the two types of cultural productions. In fact, Manjarrez’s text is a response to the question that is posed, the relevance of literature in a world of mass media.

Mass culture serves to question the position of young people’s resistance to tradition and authority. As occurs in the novels of Agustín, Sainz, and García Saldaña, North American rock is associated with the youth culture. Manjarrez’s novel presents a set of impressions revolving around the lives and connections of two Mexicans living abroad: Huberto Haltter and Humberto Heggo. With these two characters, mass culture is used to question the position of youth resistance. Huberto, the younger counterpart of the Heggo / Haltter relationship, listens to the Doors and the Beatles. The first impression of him describes him walking, “por pasillos empapados literalmente de Muzak, titubeando ante discos de jazz y hard-rock, sorbiendo una leche malteada, fumando con solemne expresión de savoir-faire, hojeando Playboy ante la Mirada indulgente de un piloto” (12). Huberto from the beginning presents the image of youth, humming hard rock music to counteract the Muzak and reading Playboy, the essential metaphor of sexual liberation. Even in his physical presentation, Huberto strives to incorporate mass culture, with its youth culture as resistance ideology. The narrator relates that, “[s]e me hizo que a lo que le tiraba era a ser un cruce – la cara de Bob Dylan,
el cuerpo de Mick Jagger, la voz de Janis Joplin” (142). Huberto represents youth and objects of mass culture in the novel facilitate this description of him. He fashions his image from the culture industry and in a sense, the mass culture determines his identity. In speaking about Huberto, the narrator states that, “[é]l aprendió a ser cool: modelándose un poco en fotos recordadas de Charlie Bird Parker y Mick Jagger. Fumaron. Discos de los Doors. Oh, Jim Morrison. ‘Five to One’ miles de veces. Pequeño fervor revolucionario, solidaridad de edad. Frases como that’s a Groove y dig, man. Un disco bien cotorro” (233). North American mass culture determines Huberto’s physical appearance as well as his language and his habits. Although mass culture here is seen as an indicator of the youth culture, it also works as a form of domination, dictating Huberto’s taste and identity.

As part of this identity which is manifested in the mass culture that he consumes and immitates, Huberto also adopts a countercultural philosophy – that of dropping out of society. In contrast, the older Humberto choses a more active form of counterculture. The narrator relates that, “[a]mbos [Huberto y Humberto] . . . tienden a adoptar actitudes anarquizantes . . . las de Haltter tienden al drop-outismo” (87). At this point, it is helpful to recall what the two protagonists are struggling with ideologically. The novel can be seen as a discourse on the idea of Mexican identity; both protagonists have a profound preoccupation with what it means to be Mexican, especially as a Mexican living abroad. The narrator explains that:

Huberto Haltter y Humberto Heggo son mexicanos; id est, ciudadanos de un país que si bien trata de seducir a la Historia con innumerables conferencias internacionales, eventos deportivos, congresos, convenios, tratados y notas
periodísticas para consumo interno sobre la increíble popularidad del país y su música en el mundo, se mantiene fuera de todas las corrientes. / Todas, por dios. Ni completamente subdesarrollado, ni cercano al desarrollo. Ni democrático, ni tiránico. (At the date of writing, mind you). Ni guiado por un de Gaulle ni por un Castro. Ni produciendo a un Che Guevara, un Ho Chi Minh, un Mao; vamos, ni siquiera un Sukarno mestizo. Huberto y Humberto son mexicanos, y burgueses mexicanos; en otras palabras, su momento histórico tuvo lugar hace cosa de cien o ciento cincuenta años. Triste, ¿no? (20-21)

In this novel, Mexican identity is stuck in a realm of insignificance: it is neither industrialized enough to form a part of the world elite, nor is it so underdeveloped to merit notice as a part of the so called “Third World.” It has not produced significant thinkers nor political leaders. For the narrator, Mexico is a forgotten land trying to raise its global prestige through international events like the Olympics of 1968 and the World Cup Finals of 1970. This sense of an insignificant national identity leads Huberto and Humberto to look outside the national boundaries for a feeling of participation. Huberto, for instance, expresses an empathy with the Black Power movement of the 60’s. The narrator reminds Huberto of this affinity with the militant North American civil rights movement: “¿No habías liberado . . . cuando Black Power y burguesía negra aclamaban a Carmichael y juraban contigo la muerte de todos los blancos? Hey burn baby burn the whole Caucasian white honky world burn burn burn” (190). The narrator goes on to explain why Huberto feels this affinity: the indefinite position of Mexico is a subaltern position. He states, “look man I’m Latin-American, dig that, I’m Third World, right?, see whadda mean cat, like Stokeley here jes said (and Stokeley –is- an honourable man) Che
Guevara is I repeat IS the greatest black, verbigracia negro no es color sino condición?” (190).

Huberto’s social conscience is exemplified in this quote and the culture industry that forms both his habits and appearance, are never completely separate. The narrator includes a list of items related to Humberto and Huberto. This list includes a recitation of the posters that Huberto places on his walls:

los siguientes (previsibles) carteles: “Let him who is without sin jail the first Stone,” con el rostro de Mick Jagger; “La Chienlit c’est lui” y “La Chienlit c’est encoré lui”; “The Spirit of Che lives in the new Evergreen!”; “Establishment Turn on and Find Peace,” con LBJ como guru; “God is Alive and Well and Living in Mexico City”; “Cuba: Work and Joy”; varios carteles de la Tricontinental, como el de Etiopía; “La Revolución es el Opio del Pueblo Mexicano”; “Long Live Radio Carolina”; “Meanwhile: 1) Freak out 2) Come back 3) Bandage the Wounded and feed however many you can, and 4) Never cheat”; Frank Zappa; “I Like Capitalism with HP Sauce: Harold Wilson; una reproducción enorme de la cara de Eldridge Cleaver” (111)

Politics and mass culture mix freely in the visual manifestation of Huberto’s personality. From the posters of the Rolling Stones and Frank Zappa to the more politicized posters of the French student movement, the North American anti-war movement, the Black Panther movement, and Latin American protest / socialist movements, these posters connect a taste for North American rock with a social conscience. The political / mass culture connection is emphasized even more by the narrator who indicates that Huberto
will die soon and that his death will benefit a group of persons unknown. At this point, the narrator asks,

[a]n existential pop star, baby? ¿un culto pop? ¿El James Dean / Jim Morrison / Mick Jagger / Eldridge Cleaver que no llegó a ser? Demasiado poco carisma para eso, aún para el subdesarrollo: admítamoslo. Céline también vio que Huberto Haltter se enamoraría y eso tal vez aplazaría un poco su muerte. Entonces, ¿quién sabe- enamorarse de Janis Joplin (Wanna be your groupie yeah yeah?) de Billie Holiday (who’s alive in our hearts)? ¿de Tania la guerrillera? ¿de Madame Binh?

In combining the cult of James Dean and Jim Morrison with the more overtly political Eldridge Cleaver or Tania la guerrillera, the narrator reinforces the connection between mass culture and politics, at the same time indicating that mass culture is a form of politics. Besides the existential pop star, political figures become appropriated by the culture industry as well. The case of Che Guevara, mentioned by several of the Onda writers, is perhaps the best example of this. Che represents a bourgeois appropriation of the idea of revolution and rebellion. In time his image comes to serve capitalism through the dissemination of t-shirts, posters, figurines, etc., at the same time that he continues to be a powerful symbol of revolutionary ideals.

Humberto, the other link in the Haltter / Heggo connection, is a middle aged architect who decides to give it all up and live the protest youth lifestyle. At one point, Humberto ponders his former middle class lifestyle, stating,

Verbigracia: ¿por qué pensé en que era Decente porque tenía buen gusto y era de pensamiento Liberal? Oh, hablemos de eso, sí: teach-in. Oh de la merde plein
Humberto leaves his comfortable lifestyle, and his family, to live the counterculture. His rejection of middle class Mexican conformity comes through a rejection of the symbols of status, The New Yorker, Playboy, Better Homes & Gardens, but most of all through a rejection of North American imperialism. That is, he rejects the symbols of upper class Mexican society, including foreign mass culture. Heeggo decides to travel to Vietnam, but also leads him to the drug culture. His experiences with LSD drive him to the conclusion that, “lo necesario ya no era inmolarse en el Capitolio, sino quemar a alguien, de preferencia un pariente muy cercano y que no fuera pobre” (77). It is important to note that Humberto does not feel an intimate connection with the products of the culture industry which other writers and protagonists take to be symbols of rebellion. Even though he participates in the countercultural drug experience, he sees North American mass culture as a symbol of his social class, from which he seeks to liberate himself. This distancing from mass culture is an important element that separates Heggo from Haltter.

Even though Humberto does not feel a strict connection to mass culture, its influence remains ever present. In a delirious episode where Heggo lives on a tropical island as absolute ruler, he renames the inhabitants with ludicrous titles:

Quantumphysics, Limonada, Idiosincracia, Flema (133-134). He reserves mass culture for a young woman stating “[l]a rebauticé – Jeanharlow por ser de tez un poco más clara
y porque traía el cabello más o menos corto, y porque me pareció una muestra de buen humor malgré tout” (134). That is to say that mass culture forms a part of his cultural background to such an extent that he carries mass culture imaginary over to a more “primitive” context. While less immersed in the youth and rock culture than Huberto, Humberto certainly uses mass culture as a part of his resistance to society in general and imperialism specifically. Ironically, Humberto manipulates the type of mass culture which he ultimately rejects, showing mass culture’s power over him.

It is the fusion of Haltter and Heggo that brings mass culture to encompass all elements of their experience. The narrator indicates that Heggo first noticed an affinity between British women and lightning bugs. The text goes on to explain that, “Huberto Haltter, mediante un proceso mental de un paralelismo notable, hacia la misma época llegó a idéntica conclusión pero fue más lejos ya que asimiló el vocablo luciérnaga al nombre propio Lucía, y de ahí a Lucy y Lucyérnaga, y a fortiori Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. (¡Ah los tiempos de flower power!)” (139). Although they both come to the same conclusion regarding the similarity of the insect and British womanhood, Haltter is the one who can fit this observation into the mold of mass culture through the Beatles’ song.

The metanarrative qualities of the text also offer insight into its conclusions regarding mass culture and literature. In an interview, Manjarrez states that in his novel, “[n]o hay argumento. Es una novela del 68-69; es una novela experimental . . . En la medida que se trata de una novela de este tipo, es user-friendly, como dicen de las computadoras de ustedes los gongos” (Teichmann 206). The creation of this novel is
meant to entice the reader to interact with it, through the narrative experimentation that Manjarrez employs.

As part of the experimentation found in the novel, Manjarrez plays with the authority of the narrator, providing various hierarchies of narrative ownership. These narrators even come into contact in the text. In the last chapter, the narrator criticizes and even theorizes the text’s author; that is to say, the narrator of at least some of the previous passages. This system sets up two narrators, one on the metanarrative level, who will be called the narrator, and one on the narrative level, who is the author. This separation does not just occur at the end of the novel, however. Throughout the novel, the narrator continually addresses the reader, and even invites the reader to change and / or subvert the formal text of the author. For example, the narrator suggests that, “si el lector prefiere que Huberto Haltter se sodomice y aloque desde ya, tiene entera libertad para imaginar un episodio de ese tenor” (22) and then continues by helpfully offering, “a los lectores neófitos en pederastía sugerimos la lectura de ‘Naked Lunch’ del gran Burroughs, donde hallarán estupendos coitós acrobáticos de abundante coprofagia” (22). The narrator does not see himself as having absolute authority over the text, but encourages resistance to a rigid adherence to the text.

This lack of narratorial control can be considered a resistance to the simplistic culture industry form of the light novel or novel of consumption. It implicitly suggests that mass culture is a force of domination in that it dictates what and how a reader is supposed to interact with the text. The narrator explores these ideas in the final chapter where, disillusioned with the ending where Jerjes and Artajerjes tell of Humberto and Huberto in the doctor’s office, the narrator exclaims “¡AUTOR DIXIT NO! LA
LITERATURA DE CONSUMO PERECERÁ DE PROSA VIOLENTA!” (212). This quote highlights two significant ideas. As stated earlier, the author is not the supreme authority, but rather the text’s value resides with the reader. More significant is the idea of literature of consumption which the narrator vehemently opposes, swearing to combat this literary mass culture through literary means. The narrator’s bellicose tone of the narrator is furthered with proclamations that, “[e]staríamos literalmente jodidos si nos hubiéramos conformado. Por el momento, que el lector nos imagine enarbolando carteles invisibles con slogans, La littérature de consummation périra de prose violente!!” (212). Conformism is tied to literature for consumption while “true” literature is tied to independent thought and action. This dynamic gives mass culture a definite aspect of domination; literature for consumption prohibits thought and thus controls the discourse by manipulating the reading while “true” literature emancipates the reader to more fully participate in the text.

The effort to emancipate the reader is taken to the point that the narrator offers a formula in which the reader can choose various forms of interpretation of the text, of the author, and of the title. These options span the range from the absurd to the thought provoking. For example, in asking who the author is, the narrator provides options ranging from a hippie to a communist, from Timothy Leary to a homosexual, from the alter ego of Martín Luis Guzmán to a CIA agent, from one who thinks that Mexico is without equal to a malinchista. This list ends openly, or rather does not end, with the possibility that the author, “—p. Es” (218). Although offering suggestions, the narrator also wants to suggest the possibility that the reader include his/her own interpretations as well.
Manjarrez, in his texts, treads the fine line between recognizing mass culture as having the potential for resistance (the case of Huberto and Humberto exemplifies this idea) to the belief that above all mass culture is a form of domination, both as a force of cultural imperialism as well as a way of controlling thought. The authorial games that occur at the end of *Lapsus* gives Manjarrez the space to question mass culture as formulaic and as a way to view it as manipulation of the masses: mass culture tells the receptor what and how to think. Looking at the novel in this light, one could even argue that the representations of mass culture connected to rebellion and revolution are merely appropriations that allow the individual (especially Haltter) to espouse a revolutionary lifestyle without really living it. The contrast to this would be Heggo, the one who does not identify himself with mass culture, but who lives a more revolutionary lifestyle, actively traveling to Vietnam as protest. Manjarrez himself refers to this in talking about the attitude that both Haltter and Heggo take regarding their countercultural attitude. While Haltter engages in drop-outism, the narrator states that, “es honrado señalar que la [actitud] de Humberto es mucho más original; poca gente de su generación ha llevado el desencanto a una conclusión” (87).

Just as the Haltter / Heggo dualism points out varying attitudes toward society and towards mass culture, all of the authors discussed in this chapter recognize the ability of mass culture to be a force of resistance or a force of domination. In addition, mass culture is inextricably linked to the youth counterculture and the ideology of resistance against official discourses of national identity and cultural hegemony. What Monsiváis, Agustín, García Saldaña, Sainz and Manjarrez all implicitly reflect in their narration is the impossibility of describing the Mexican youth culture of the 1960s without including
mass culture and without focusing on the dynamics of resistance and domination, counterculture and cultural imperialism, Onda and Establishment.

1 It must be noted that the student movement and the rock counterculture of Avándaro are two distinct phenomena which are related but not one and the same. José Agustín explains that “muchos de los estudiantes no eran proclives a la contracultura. De hecho, en ese sentido el movimiento fue una típica evolución de las actividades contestatarias de la izquierda mexicana, que, debido a su entusiasmo por la revolución cubana, era sumamente latinoamericanista” (Contracultura 82). Thus, for many within the student movement, rock music was associated not with rebellion but with cultural imperialism.

2 In fact, Agustín began writing his first novel, La tumba, when he was only sixteen years old.

3 Many critics, most notably Richard Teichman and Inke Gunia, have noted the importance of young writers writing for other young Mexicans. Gunia states that, “[l]a novedad de estas obras residía, sobre todo, en la intención de retratar vivencias propias de adolescentes mexicanos contemporáneos desde la perspectiva exclusivista de estos adolescentes y anunciar la necesidad de un cambio de los valores establecidos que afectaba todos los ámbitos de la sociedad Mexicana y el papel de la juventud en particular” (19).

4 Castellanos also compares the Onda writers to Jesusa Palancares, the woman featured in her testimonial novel Hasta no verte, Jésus mío, because both share a preoccupation with the working classes. She states that, “Parménides ni se diga, José Agustín fue a dar hasta Lecumberri, Jesús Luis Benitez se piró, Enrique Aguilar y Javier Córdova provienen de estratos muy populares . . .” (!Ay, Dios! 174). While this statement is questionable, since many of the Onda works portray middle class, upwardly ascendent society, the fact that both the testimonio and the Onda aesthetic give voice to a suppressed, unofficial discourse certainly has merit.

5 Although, as we will see later, Onda writers do in fact experiment both linguistically and stylistically to create complex experimental works. García Saldañas Pasto verde and Agustín’s Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna) are both examples of modernist stream of consciousness writing which simply situate them within the artistic currents of their day. What separates the Onda writers and Glantz’s idea of “Escritura” is rather the topic and linguistic register which they choose to use.

6 For example, José Agustín was friends with both Parménides García Saldaña and Gustavo Sainz, but Sainz and García Saldaña had never met. Mere friendship does not necessarily mean anything in terms of artistic expression, as Agustín was friends with Margo Glanz, the critic who initiated the “Onda / Escritura” debate and Parménides García Saldaña was also friends with one of the members of the so called “ Mafia,” Elena Poniatowska. Neither Glantz nor Poniatowska have any literary connection with the countercultural sex, drugs, rock and roll aesthetic of Agustín and García Saldaña.
Agustín continues to give examples, like René Avilés Fábila, Juan Tovar and Elsa Cross, who do not fit within the sex, drugs, rock and roll schema that the strict interpretation of “la Onda” implies. The label “Onda” certainly has had a negative effect on many of the authors who have been included in the group, for one denying them a space within literary legitimacy through the very ideas that Margo Glanz expresses in her essay. These authors, except perhaps Gustavo Sainz, were rarely considered serious authors because of their interest in the lives of young people and mass culture, and thus had a difficult time being taken seriously.

George McMurray in a 1968 article titled “Trends in the Mexican Novel” does indeed talk about Sainz and Agustín, but includes them in “a surprisingly large group of younger novelists ranging in age from twenty-three to thirty five” (532), which also includes the likes of Vicente Leñero, Salvador Elizondo and Fernando del Paso. McMurray also traces a direct link between Sainz and Agustín, citing the youth content of the novels and the critical attitude towards society.

Brushwood, as did Langford, also includes short sections dedicated specifically to Agustín and Sainz in his study, as well as including them within his literary history, The Spanish American Novel.

Juan Pellicer, in his article, “De los jóvenes tiempos de la Onda al maduro espacio de la ficción virtual” looks at the changes in Gustavo Sainz’s aesthetics in comparing Gazapo (1965) and La novela virtual (1998). Alba Lara de Alengrin proposes that José Agustín maintains a focus throughout his writings, from the 60’s to the 90’s that combines, “una propuesta de escritura que radica en la incorporación gozosa de las formas orales como discurso literario, la voluntad de reflejar su presente histórica y la temática de la búsqueda identitaria” (91). Cynthia Steele also comments briefly on the importance and development of the Onda in a section titled, “La Onda Reaches Middle Age” (18). She cites the Onda as an important influence in later writers in both its social preoccupation and its emphasis on colloquial language. Regarding other trends, Raymond L. Williams includes Agustín and Sainz, and to a lesser extent Héctor Manjárez, in his works on literary postmodernism, The Postmodern Novel in Latin America (1995), and La narrative posmoderna en México (2002).

Although Reinhard Teichman in talking about a change in the freedom of the press that occurs in the 1960s states that, “[p]arte de esa liberación limitada ha sido el rock, muy relevante en la literatura y sobre todo en la Onda, cuyos escritores lo consideraban como un vehículo para la rebelión” (34). This statement affirms the position of rock and mass culture in the Onda narrative as a force of resistance, but does not take into account the flip side of the argument, the possibility of domination.

This is not to say that the reviewer discards all Onda writing, but merely sees most Onda style manuscripts as simply trying to follow the formula of the novels that define the movement without providing real innovation.

Which is not surprising, given that the Mexican Revolution was not a cohesive movement and all of the various revolutionary figures had differing opinions as to where reform was needed.
This upsurge in the importance of mass culture also coincides with the continued urbanization of the country.

The “golden age” of Mexican film is generally considered to occur from 1940 to 1954.

As will be discussed later, Monsiváis shows a clear progression from an acceptance of the North American culture industry to a marked distrust. His idea of the North Americanization of the Mexican culture industry will dominate his critical writings about the Onda.

Although there was also a certain connection with the Rebel without a Cause tradition in Mexico as well. The Rebel without a Cause simply complements the larger debate on the validity of North American cultural production in Mexico, especially those products which the culture industry specifically marketed to youth.

That is not to say that some in the upper classes did not continue to consume North American mass culture, but it later becomes more of a symbol of cultural and moral depravity than a symbol of cultural and economic status.

For more information on the events surrounding the riot and its consequences, see Zolov (47-51).

The Avándaro Festival was a Woodstock style music festival held in September of 1970.

José Agustín explains that Mexican rock and roll groups essentially translated North American stardom directly and so, “los Hermanos Carrión resultaron los Everly Brothers nacionales, Julissa fue la Doris Day mecscicana, Vianey Valdés la Brenda Lee y César Costa el Paul Anka del Nopal” (Contracultura 39).

Although Leary was eventually dismissed from Harvard due to his fascination with LSD (Monsiváis, Amor perdido 228).

It should be understood that the student movement and the jipiteca movements are two separate ones, although there are certainly some overlaps. As José Agustín explains, the jipitecas are the Mexican equivalent to the North American hippy movement which expresses views of freedom and non-violence and were typically involved in the drug culture. The hippies as symbol are connected to drugs, rock music, and sexual liberation. Agustín states that, “Enrique Marroquín . . . planteó que estos jipis mexicanos debían ser llamados ‘jipitecas’ (jipis aztecas, jipis toltecas), para diferenciarlos de los jipis de Estados Unidos. La distinción es necesaria porque, si bien coincidieron en el gustito por los alucinógenos y en la experiencia extática, los mexicanos se identificaron con los indios” (Contracultura 76). The student movement certainly contains some who are fans of rock music and perhaps participate in the drug culture, but it contains a much broader collection of experiences and ideologies than the jipitecas.

While the massacre of students on October 2, 1971 is not the only factor in the urban guerrilla movement, nor is armed resistance the only mode of protest after the killings, Tlatelolco certainly plays a part in the formation of urban guerrilla groups. What Tlatelolco showed was the government’s rejection of peaceful yet public forums of protest. As Michael Soldatenko argues,”the struggle for liberty and democracy continued after Tlatelolco. Many of the movement’s activists, for instance, remained active. Some participated in traditional political parties, while others worked in new organizations or
joined guerrilla movements such as the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre” (126). John Sherman also argues that guerrilla activity stemmed from the Tlatelolco massacre and subsequent attack on June 10, 1971 in Mexico City (603).

26 See Agustín (Contracultura 76-81) for more on the jipitecas.

27 The “encuerada”, Alma Rosa Gómez López, was a teenage attendee of the festival who gained international fame due to topless pictures of her that appeared in Piedra Rodante, the Mexican version of Rolling Stone magazine. Carlos Monsiváis, in an interview, records her stating that her strip tease, was, “una liberación de todano, me aliviané el resto porque nunca antes lo había hecho en público. Además estábamos en un campo donde se quemaba y se hacía lo que uno quería . . .” (Amor perdido 254). The attitude of the encuerada shows the spirit of the community of Avándaro, to throw off all inhibitions and constraints. It is this very attitude that those on the right criticize because to throw off constraints is also to throw off parental and societal authority.

28 On June 10th, a group of Halcones, a right wing paramilitary group, attacked a protest of some 30,000 students in Mexico City killing at least 50 of them (Zolov 191-92).

29 Although the eldest of the group mentioned, Monsiváis is only two years older than Sainz. He is also included in the collection of youth autobiographies, Nuevos Escritores Mexicanos del Siglo XX Presentados por Sí Mismos. This collection includes Agustín and Sainz.

30 Dick Hebdige explores the definition of subculture in his work Subculture: The Meaning of Style. In talking about punk in Great Britain, Hebdige explains that, “instead of arriving at the point where we can begin to make sense of style, we have reached the very place where meaning itself evaporates” (117). Hebdige argues that subculture is a reaction to problems in society and he explores the ways in which the culture industry as well as other parts of consumer society are utilized by and then in turn appropriate subcultural style. He states that, “[s]ubcultures are representations of these representations [that is, media representations of the social totality], and elements taken from the ‘picture’ of working-class life (and of the social whole in general) are bound to find some echo in the signifying practices of the various subcultures” (86). Thus, one can conclude that subculture rises from the society by which it defines itself in opposition at the same time that it makes use of the structures (both social and economic) within that society to perpetuate itself.

31 Martine Renouprez describes Agustín’s own insistence on becoming a part of the literary elite while at the same time maintaining his popular appeal. It is for this reason that Agustín insists on La tumba being published in the Grandes Escritores de Nuestro Tiempo series published by Novaro. Renouprez states that, “José Agustín se daba el derecho de ser reconocido como gran autor sin por ello sacrificar la idea del éxito popular” (176).

32 At the same time, the inclusion of rock and the idea of Agustín as an Onda writer has led Mario Rojas to suggests that Agustín’s novels express a poetics of rock. He states that, “José Agustín asume la estructura conceptual y formal del rock como un componente definitorio de su arte poética. Uno de los rasgos específicos del rock, además de su carácter altamente popular, es el englobamiento de elementos dispares y
heterogéneos” (143). Rojas continues by explaining that Agustín incorporates elements of the rock subculture, including a dissolution of traditional sexual conventions, drugs, and Eastern mysticism like the I-Ching. As Agustín develops his artistic aesthetic, the connection to the poetics of rock becomes even more intense, through the use of slang and cultural references, as well as other innovations in the use of language. Rojas observes that, “Agustín no sólo innova el material lingüístico a nivel de la palabra, sino que traspasándola, crea nuevas formas tipográficas a nivel de la frase. Surge así imágenes pictóricas, que como en la poesía concreta ayudan a reforzar las imágenes verbales” (148). While Rojas is absolutely right that Agustín flirts with narrative experimentation, the assertion that this is part of a poetics of rock seems a stretch. Agustín creates a complex narrative which in many ways approximates high culture opera (as Bruce-Novoa argues) more than mass culture, which is why the narrator and the novel itself give these forms of culture preference.

Bruce-Novoa also connects the Wagnerian idea of the leitmotif with the opera Lohengrin within the novel.

33 Bruce-Novoa also connects the Wagnerian idea of the leitmotif with the opera Lohengrin within the novel.
34 Gabriel rejects Laura’s invitation to drive with her the night she is killed.
35 While El rey Criollo gives mass culture a principle place in the subject and structure of the work, it is important to recognize that it does not equate rock with high culture, nor does it explore the idea of a consumer based community. García Saldaña merely makes use of mass culture in order to create a more high culture narrative, but one which has connections to the youth culture of his day.
36 D’Lugo states that, “the original novels of the Onda reveal yet another source of fragmented discourse that continues the established pattern of pairing the aesthetic and the social: a metaphoric statement of the alienation of youth, the creation of a counterculture that finds affinity in the literary style that rebels against previous conventions of linearity” (Fragmented Novel 165).
37 Agustín’s work Abolición de la propiedad (1969) furthers the narrative innovation found in “Amor del bueno.” This text, which has been seen as both novel and work of theater, utilizes recordings and film to tell and foretell the encounter of two people, Norma and Everio. George Woodyard argues that the use of language and of medium for this language (from prose, fiction, poetry, song, tape and video recordings, a rock band and an orchestra) contribute to a sense of varying levels of reality (32).
38 García Saldaña is certainly not the only author to express this disconnect between government appropriation of the revolution and their own revolutionary sentiments. In her chronicle of the events surrounding the student massacre on October 2, 1968, La noche de Tlatelolco, Elena Poniatowska records the sentiments of many involved in the student movement, who show a complete disillusionment with the government and official PRI ideology. Claudia Cortés González, for instance, explains that “[y]o nunca he pensado realmente en Zapata como en un símbolo estudiantil, un emblem. Zapata ya está integrado a la ideología burguesa; ya se lo apropió el PRI. Quizá por eso, en un principio, en nuestras manifestaciones escogimos al Che. ¡El Che nos unía también a todos los movimientos estudiantiles del mundo!... Tampoco pensamos jamás en Pancho Villa. ¡Ése ni siquiera nos pasó por la cabeza!” (40). Instead of trying
to revalidate Zapata and Villa as García Saldaña does, many in the student movement opt for outside revolutionary influences like Che Guevara.

39 It is interesting to note the reference to Quetzalcoatl here as well, given the symbolic and historical capital of the figure. Quetzalcoatl was the Aztec feathered serpent god. Popular legend/history states that the Aztec ruler Moctezuma, mistook Hernán Cortés for Quetzalcoatl, thus facilitating the conquest of the Aztec empire. This reference, then, could be taken in two ways: the first being that of the symbol of Mexican indigenous identity. A more subversive reading of the figure Quetzalcoatl, however, could be tied to rock music and Marxism in this passage: Quetzalcoatl as the gateway to (in this case a more ideological and symbolic) conquest. In this interpretation, rock music, and the culture industry, function as a catalyst for the elimination of societal barriers that as a result could lead to a more equal society (via socialism).

40 Once again, the connection with Elena Poniatowska’s *La noche de Tlatelolco* is worth mentioning; the Onda writers are not the only ones questioning the official idea of Mexican identity and historical tradition. These ideas are circulating widely.

41 Johnny’s status, and his world view, is also contrasted with that of the Zendejas family as he is relating a tale from his Western days. Johnny affirms that all men are above all inherently good. Although Mr. Zendejas agrees, Mrs. Zendejas responds, saying “[p]ues nuestros delincuentes juveniles, lo dudo mucho” (17). Mrs. Zendejas effectively separates the form of Western serial altruism that Johnny brings with him, opting instead for another form of mass culture stereotyping, that of the Rebel without a Cause.

42 The idea of “drop-outismo”, of course, comes from the famous Timothy Leary mantra: “Turn on, tune in, drop out” (see Agustín, *La contracultura en México* 61-64, or Monsiváis, *Amor perdido* 228).

43 It is important to remember that what was mass culture in the United States at this time (the 1960s and 1970s) and thus largely rejected by the upper class was seen in Mexico as a symbol of status, and thus “belonged” more to the upper and middle classes because of the limited availability (only those who had the economic ability to acquire mass culture and understood English could effectively consume North American mass culture).

44 This episode is titled “Scream of consciousness à la J’aime Joys – Para Carlos Fuentes” (120) and provides a playful example of stream of consciousness narrative, adding to the experimental nature of the text.
Chapter 3

Movies, Tango, Gender and Identity: Manuel Puig

Although few would question Manuel Puig’s status as a canonical author today, over forty years after the publication of his first novel, his initial reception was rather less positive. Many critics saw Puig at best as a curiosity, largely due to the scale and scope of mass culture within his narrative. More so than the “Onda” writers, Manuel Puig is known specifically for his interaction with mass culture. Like Agustín, Sainz, Parménides García and Manjarrez, Puig rejected of the current literary trends of the day, resulting in an ambiguous place in Latin American literary criticism. He is seen as an author who jumps on the bandwagon of the Boom (Pope 232), or a postmodern author who uses mass culture as a way of constructing identity (Williams Modern Latin American Novel 127, Postmodern Novel in Latin America 80). Puig’s place in criticism specifically and his connection to mass culture is further complicated by the 1985 Academy Award winning film Kiss of the Spider Woman directed by Hector Babenco. The paradox of Puig is perhaps best expressed by Jonathan Tittler, who, on seeing two articles about Puig’s death, writes of his realization that “Manuel Puig would be known to future generations not so much for the diverse textures of his unorthodox novels as for a film in whose production he figured secondarily, a by-product of one of his narratives” (601).

While the Boom writers were creating their totalizing novels with self contained cosmovisions as a new complex aesthetic, Puig expressed his own aesthetic innovation in
the form of mass culture. In his novels, Puig uses examples of mass culture in order to further the plot and express the psychology of his characters. In contrast to the Onda writers, who were interested in expressing a specifically Mexican generational ethos, Puig maintains a strong connection to Argentine identity, but explores themes like identity and sexuality through the use of mass culture as well as probing the limits of cultural boundaries. This difference, from seeing mass culture as a way of exploring a generational and national identity, to looking at mass culture as a way of exploring systems of gender identity and relations explains why the discourse of cultural imperialism seems to disappear with Puig. Puig, does not question to what extent cultural forces from outside the nation influence national identity or whether this is a positive or negative thing, but rather focuses on how mass culture influences marginalized populations. This is in part why Puig decides to utilize less prestigious genres for his works, as an attempt to revalidate them. Puig himself expresses this in an interview when he states, “[y]o no creo que el folletín y la novela policial sean géneros menores, porque son los que me gustan, por eso trato de demostrar su validez” (Sosnowski 73). Puig seeks to show the validity of the marginalized genres in a parallel to the discourse of gender identity and power that he explores in his novels.³

The characters in Puig’s novels utilize the mass culture that surrounds them for a variety of purposes: as a form of escapism or easy out, or as a way of critically examining and interacting with their lived experience. In short, mass culture in Puig’s novels can be seen as a way of exploring social status and systems of power through socially structured ideas of identity and sexuality. Some ten years after Julio Cortázar proposed his theory of the lector macho and the lector hembra in his novel Rayuela, validating literary ability
as a masculine trait and relegating blind consumption to the realm of the feminine, Puig questions these categories and argues that neither the mass culture / literature (high culture) paradigm nor the masculine / feminine paradigms are so easily understood. Puig does this in order to propose that critical interaction with texts of all kinds is necessary in order to resist these social constructs.

Within Boquitas pintadas (1969), Puig’s second novel, mass culture is used to emphasize the discourse of gender and power structures found in the novel. Mass culture is a prevalent force in the everyday lives of the protagonists, inundating their thoughts and speech in a way that is more prominent than what occurs in the Onda writings. In contrast to Agustin, Sainz and Manjarrez, Puig explores the culture of the lower classes. Because mass culture plays such an important role in the novel, it can also be used to help describe the psychology of the protagonists who value mass cultural values and aesthetics. It gives them a frame of reference and provides a space in which they can reflect on their understanding of the world. Guada Martí-Peña argues that the forms of mass culture in Boquitas pintadas, film, radio, folletín, tango and bolero, give the protagonists a common vocabulary to be able to interact as well as a dominating ideological framework (94). This common vocabulary also sheds light on the social values that the different protagonists hold. For instance, in describing Nené, Pancho thinks that, “Nené no era una india bruta: hablaba como una artista de la radio y al final de las palabras debidas no olvidaba de pronunciar las eses” (Boquitas 78). He equates proper speech with mass culture and does so as a positive quality. Here, Nené, despite her ancestry, is elevated in Pancho’s mind because of the approximation of her speech to that of a radio star.
In looking at mass culture within *Boquitas pintadas* it is also necessary to look at the social context in which it is seen. Mass culture in the novel is a socially derived activity, requiring interaction for its effectiveness. In this it is very similar to the use of mass culture in the Onda writers. Puig, however, focuses on the community of rural lower class Argentina as opposed to the urban upper middle class of the Mexican Ondistas. The sense of community involvement with mass culture found in *Boquitas pintadas* is underscored in several passages that affirm the collective nature of the experience. For example, in Pancho’s house, “todos agrupados escuchaban por radio a un cantor de tangos” (*Boquitas* 81). The majority of the consumers of mass culture in the novel are women, which raises the questions, what does mass culture have to do with gender? If the function of mass culture is to provide an escape or to promote a resistance to a controlling domination, what exactly is the situation they want to escape? Gender and class identity seen through the interactions of the protagonists provides the answers to these questions.

The novel is composed of a series of interrelated relationships. This interpersonal web shows the diversity of the community, but also allows an analysis of power structures. The novel revolves around Juan Carlos, a problematic Don Juan figure. He was once Nenés boyfriend, Mabel’s lover, and Pancho’s mentor. The practical, yet simplistic Nené loves Juan Carlos till her death in 1968 even though she marries another. Mabel is a more independent woman, pursuing an illicit relationship with Juan Carlos and then seducing his friend Pancho. The apprentice Pancho in his own right is engaged in seducing and fathering a child with Raba, who murders him upon learning of his various indiscretions. It is significant that this murder occurs as Pancho is having an affair with
Mabel and is leaving her house; Mabel subsequently helps Raba win absolution by constructing her plea of self defense.

In looking at these interpersonal relationships, the figure of Don Juan is an important one to recognize in Juan Carlos. As Kerr notes, Puig presents both an affirmation as well as a subversion of the Don Juan ideal of the overtly masculine. Thus, we could see Nené’s experience as one in which the Juan Carlos’ masculinity is a manifestation of his power over her, resulting from her continued infatuation with him. Nené is the typical passive feminine subject who allows events to pass her by. Mabel, on the other hand, is a more engaged subject. She rejects social norms by continuing her affair with Juan Carlos and eventually subverts the conquest / conqueror model by adding to her own tally with the novice in training, Pancho. Mabel’s active engagement signals her rejection of society’s masculine dominated ideology. Raba’s position could be seen as one in between Mabel and Nené. She initially allows herself to be manipulated, which results in the child she has with Pancho. However, she takes matters into her own hands when she discovers Pancho’s infidelities and shatters his Don Juan image by violently killing him.

The protagonists’ attitude towards mass culture contributes to the creation of these interpersonal webs as well as to the discourse of gender power structures in the novel. Nené, for example, takes a passive role but engages with mass cultural texts critically, many times providing a subversive reading of the text. In her resistance to the scripted discourse of mass culture gives Nené an ambiguous ending in the novel.

Mass culture is clearly important for her. She differentiates between her life in the provinces and her increasing unhappiness in Buenos Aires through her reflections on
mass culture. Her initial reaction to the city, however, is very favorable. Her fascination with the city during her honeymoon is largely centered on the availability of theater and film. In a letter to Mabel, she recounts her fascination with the urban scene, “estoy tan encantada que quiero quedarme en el centro” (Boquitas 144) mostly due to the accessibility of entertainment. She proceeds to comment on the films or plays that she and her husband have seen every day, monopolizing her account of the city. As the honeymoon period, both with her husband and with the city, slowly fades, Nené changes her opinion dramatically. She feels abandoned and lonely, her previous fascination with the entertainment district wanes as economic constraints restrict her consumption. It is in this disillusioned state that Nené uses mass culture to express the differences between her life in the provinces and life in Buenos Aires. She writes that, “¡Qué distinto era en Vallejos! A la tarde venía alguna amiga, charlábamos, escuchábamos la novela, bueno, eso cuando no trabajaba en la tienda. . .” (Boquitas 30). Even though she has geographically drawn closer to the center of the culture industry, she has no one with whom to share this privileged space. Her lack of social interaction, the inability to interpret a given mass culture text through dialogue with others, precipitates a great sense of nostalgia and loss in Nené. It is precisely the collective nature of the mass culture experience that enables Nené to engage with it and accounts for her lack of enthusiasm for the radionovela as a part of her life in Buenos Aires.⁶

The most significant example of Nené’s critical attitude towards mass culture comes from a conversation between Mabel and Nené regarding a radionovela about a French soldier and his lover. Their conversation fluctuates between the idealist world of the radionovela that Mabel revels in, and the practical world of Nené’s own experience.
After a scene in which the wounded soldier and the peasant meet in a granary, Nené responds: “Claro, ella no puede hacerse ilusiones con él porque ya se le entregó, porque yo pensé que si no se le había entregado antes cuando eran jovencitos, y en el granero él estaba herido y no podía suceder nada, entonces él volvería con más ganas” (Boquitas 199). To this practical statement, that the soldier would be more willing to return to her if she had not already given herself to him, Mabel insists that “[e]so no tiene nada que ver, si la quiere la quiere” (Boquitas 200). True love is a real and vital thing for Mabel while the practicality of relationships and sex taint Nené’s interpretation of the radionovela. This approach is also seen later, when Mabel exclaims in disgust of the relationship between the woman and her husband: “¿Pero ésta se deja pegar? !qué estúpida!” (Boquitas 203). Nené responds with experience that “Mabel, lo hará por los hijos ¿tiene hijos?” (Boquitas 203). Although Mabel does not change her vision of the radionovela, preferring the simple story of true love, the fact that Nené reinterprets the events in a public fashion to fit into her own situation shows how mass culture can be used as a point of departure for dialogue that can threaten the stability of the domination model. It is when the consumer becomes an engaged critic, as Nené does, and starts to see beyond the patterns established by the culture industry that mass culture can be seen to promote resistance because it promotes interaction with the text.

As Kerr notes, the novel passes judgments on the various protagonists due to their pacts and betrayals (Suspended Fictions 111). Nené finds an ambiguous ending, achieving a final union with Juan Carlos in death by burning their letters. According to Kerr, “Nené’s end, her final rewards and punishments, carry her ‘up’ and yet bring her ‘down’” (Suspended Fictions 111-12). Looking at this ending through the prism of mass
culture adds another dimension to the discussion. Nené, although a passive subject, is also practical. She marks the different stages of her life through social interaction, claiming that at least in Coronel Vallejos there were others to share the radionovela, giving the peripheral provinces more prestige than the cultural center. She also interprets (or re-interprets) mass cultural texts to relate to her own situation, explaining the radionovela of the French soldier in a very practical way. Although she is a passive subject, she is an active interpreter of texts, which leads to her eventual ambiguous ending. She does not simply allow herself to buy into the domination paradigm of mass culture, but neither does she actively work towards a societal subversion; she simply recognizes the societal constraints on her own actions.

A more active protagonist in the social sphere, Mabel’s interactions with mass cultural texts are characterized by her idealism. As stated earlier, she favors the true love interpretation of the French soldier radionovela where romantic love conquers all obstacles. Mabel’s interpretations of texts provide neither depth nor critical engagement, which will prove to be important to the end that waits for her in the novel.

It is also through Mabel’s thoughts that the text explores the various levels of prestige given to different forms of mass culture and also the perceptual difference between national cinema production and Hollywood standards. This exchange begins, however, in a very mundane, practical manner. The narrator explains that Mabel:

Se quitó la ropa de calle y se cubrió con una fresca bata de casa. Colocó el ventilador eléctrico en la mesa de luz y entornó las persianas dejando la luz necesaria para leer la cartelera cinematográfica publicada en el diario. Nada mejor que elegir una sala con refrigeración para escapar con su tía, también
Choosing a theater becomes a matter of choosing a location in which to escape the heat of the summer in an air conditioned space. On this level, the level of Mabel’s reality, the decision has less to do with the aesthetic quality of the buildings or taste in the movies that are going to be viewed, but centers on which theaters offer a way to avoid the oppressive heat of summer. Mabel’s desire to escape the heat is also judiciously weighed against the need to take the stifling subway to arrive downtown, a cost which is more than made up for in the combination of entertainment and comfort.

After deciding the practicality of her trip to the cinema, Mabel then has to choose between a variety of more or less equal venues. It is here that Mabel’s aesthetic judgment comes into play. In debating among the different cinemas and their offerings, Mabel affirms that, “películas nacionales sólo veía en Vallejos, cuando no había otra cosa que hacer” (Boquitas 136). National cinematic production takes a definite second place to the Hollywood superproductions with their international stars like Robert Taylor or Tyrone Powers.

It is for these foreign movie stars that Mabel reserves a space in her fantasy, adding, “[e]n ese momento su mayor deseo era ver entrar sigilosamente por la puerta de su cuarto a Robert Taylor, o en su defecto a Tyrone Power, con un ramo de rosas rojas en la mano y en los ojos un designio voluptuoso” (Boquitas 137). Rather than bestow her fantasy on national figures, which have a more real connection with her own situation,
Mabel looks beyond her borders. It is easier to place her desire and even her taste in the unattainable foreign. Mabel can constantly delay the fruition of this desire, heightening the nature of the desire. Recognizing the impossibility of her fantasy, Mabel gives mass culture an escapist function. It allows her to leave her own situation, that of middle class rural Argentine woman, for a brief moment. This function of mass culture for her is highlighted in the text by the fact that immediately after describing her greatest desire, the text adds her greatest fear, that her family would suffer a grave economic setback due to her ex-fiancé (Boquitas 137).

This sense of escapism leads Mabel to save two pages from the magazine Mundo femenino. Both of these pages directly connect mass culture with consumerism. The first describes, “Coqueto conjunto para cocktail realizado en seda moiré, con casquete Julieta, según la nueva moda inspirada por la superproducción Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Romeo y Julieta, del inmortal W. Shakespeare. Foto M-G-M” (Boquitas 48) and the second “La nueva sensación del cine, Deanna Durbin, propone a las jovencitas este luminoso conjunto para ciclismo, realizado en jersey de hilo blanco, destacándose los bordes con vivo en ‘zigzag’ color rojo. Foto Universal Pictures” (Boquitas 48). The escapism provided by MGM and Universal Studios is a tangible thing that can approach reality through the consumption of the goods, which are explicitly connected to the movie star’s glamour. The second advertisement especially ties the glamour of Hollywood with consumption, indicating that Deanna Durbin recommends to all young women this particular cycling outfit. By consuming and then wearing the outfit that Durbin does, the individual can share the stardom of the actress. They can pretend to approximate her level of sophistication and fame. This is not to say that the manipulation is not a
conscious one; it is helpful to remember Tomlinson’s comments about cultural
imperialism. In refuting the idea of cultural imperialism, Tomlinson talks of a study
conducted by Ien Ang, which found that although consumption of the television program
Dallas was widespread, actual ideological manipulation was not necessarily present (45-
50). It is possible, then, that consumption is completely voluntary; women will purchase
the outfit simply because they want it. It is clear that Mabel creates an idealized version
of her experiences through mass culture.

Mabel ends the novel in a position of decline. Although of the three principal
female protagonists she began the novel in the best social context, at the end of the novel
she must continue to work into her old age to help care for a sick grandson. Of all of the
protagonists, Mabel utilizes mass culture as a form of escapism the most, fantasizing
about Hollywood stars, cutting pages out of mass culture magazines and interpreting the
radionovela in a stylized romantic way. It is perhaps this sense of escapism that invades
her own actions. She disregards social conventions in an attempt to remake a romantic
ideal for herself, a sort of femeninism grounded in a romantic notion of society. Her
affair with Juan Carlos and her later betrayal of him with Pancho conform to the
radionovela mystique that she allows to guide her actions. Mabel is neither a practical
nor a critical subject, but is an active one. Her lack of critical interaction, however, leads
to her own downfall as she is forced to atone for her actions.

Mabel is certainly not the only protagonist who sees mass culture as a form of
escapism. It is important to remember, however, that the escapism in Boquitas pintadas
is not the complete escapism that Adorno and Horkheimer propose in which mass culture
masks the social situation of the consumer as well as giving him / her the impractical
hope of another life. The examples of escapism cover the spectrum from the more idealistic Mabel to the romantic, yet practical Raba. Raba sees mass culture as a distraction, a way to make her day less tedious, stating that,

Las tareas a realizar cuando el patrón estaba en casa eran las más pesadas, porque no podía acompañarse cantando, mientras que a la mañana entonaba diversas melodías, en general tangos, milongas y tangos-canción escuchadas en las últimas películas de su actriz-cantante favorita.(83)

This distraction, however, does not take her completely away from her reality as María Ester Martínez would suggest. Martínez writes that “[l]os personajes son seres solitarios, carecen de un territorio interno soberano y ante una crisis sólo pueden mirarse en los ojos de lo otro: los epígrafes, las radionovelas, las canciones y la vida social que describen las revistas” (118). Rather than a complete escape, Raba’s experience is tinged with her own reality. She wishes for the perfect mass culture ending, but in another reflection of Tomlinson’s critique of the domination argument, she recognizes the improbability of this perfect ending actually happening.

In Puig’s text, Raba recounts a film that she has seen recently in which a servant falls in love with a law student who resides in the house where she works. Although there are difficulties, in the end everything works out for the servant. In analyzing the movie, the text states that, “Raba decidió que si alguien de otra clase social, superior, un día le proponía matrimonio ella no iba a ser tonta y rechazarlo, pero tampoco sería ella quien lo provocase” (Boquitas 84). Just as the servant in the movie, who, “nunca se había propuesto enamorarlo” (Boquitas 84), Raba will not reject the possibility of climbing the social scale, but neither will she expect it. She uses the film that she has
seen as a guidebook about how to live her life and how to relate with other classes. It also functions as a way of escaping her reality. Raba is able to imagine a love affair which will allow her to leave her present social and economic reality, but it is an escapism that recognizes its own improbability too. Raba is realistic enough to not expect to be swept off her feet by a rich lawyer, but she will not discount the possibility.\(^8\)

The idea of a double reality in which mass culture functions as an escape for the protagonists is certainly not a new one. Viviana Gimenez comments that, “[s]e nos presenta así un doble juego de realidades, por lo que tenemos, por una parte, los tangos, comerciales, novelas y filmes (todos ellos reproducciones, no hay nada original), como oponiéndose a la realidad cotidiana de Vallejos, y sirviéndoles de escapatoria a sus habitantes” (448). Mass culture gives the protagonists a conscious respite. The entertainment that they consume is never seen as a way of replacing their lived reality, however, but merely as a mode of passing the time. The advertising that Mabel saves demonstrates that mass culture even offers the individual a glimpse of hope that he or she can transcend the border between their own existence and the perfect Romeo and Juliet life that is viewed on the movie screen. This hope is punctuated by the recognition that the perfect Hollywood ending is not one that practically can be expected.

Related to this, one could say that the attraction of mass culture as a form of escapism is possible because mass culture offers a product that the character can understand. In mass culture, the individual sees reflected the possibilities for their own life. Margery Safir has commented on the parallels between the lyrics of tangos that are epilogues to the entregas. She states that these tangos, “revelan, en el nivel de sentido, una analogía con la situación de Nené, quien después de años de casada se atormenta por
el fantasma de Juan Carlos” (51). It is through this connection, in this case negatively charged, that the individual is able to see another life. While it is true that the protagonists have a real connection to the mass cultural texts that they encounter, it is the way that they interact with these texts that becomes important.

Thus, Raba’s ending validates her position as the female protagonist who combines practical interpretation and action. Her interactions with mass culture underscore her enjoyment, but also the separation she maintains from the texts themselves. She admits that she would not resist an engagement with a suitor of a higher social class, but neither would she expect it. She is also willing to resolve conflict through action, much like Mabel. The murder of Pancho and her self defense plea give her the opening for the happiness which the other women seek. The end of the novel finds Raba preparing for her daughter’s wedding after a prosperous life with her deceased husband.

Boquitas pintadas provides a space in which mass culture can be used as a part of the discourse of gender. In examining the possibilities of resistance and domination within the novel, Puig proposes that in order to subvert the oppressive gender roles assigned by society, it is necessary to interact critically with the world (of which mass culture is an important part). It is especially significant that Puig proposes critical interaction with traditionally minor genres, genres that do not have the cultural capital of entrenched high art. Thus Puig elevates mass culture through active critical engagement in much the same way that he proposes a resistance to gender roles. If the protagonist takes a critical and active part in his/her environment, they are able to improve their lot in
life. The masses behavior as critics, rather than passive receptors for domination make all the difference.

In his third novel, *The Buenos Aires Affair* (1973), Puig examines mass and high culture in a related, yet more deliberate way. Rather than including the forms of culture as mere background to the story, in this novel culture in its various manifestations becomes a much more prominent theme, allowing for a more direct theorizing in the novel. At the intradiegetic level, the character development creates a space in which Puig explores the interactions between mass and high culture. While it has all the elements necessary for a detective novel, *The Buenos Aires Affair* also combines narrative experimentation with character development, as do all of Puig’s novels. The reader is interested in the potential story of murder that unfolds, but at the same time delves deeper into the psychology of the characters than one would expect in a typical detective novel. In fact, entire chapters are dedicated to the lives of the two main protagonists, Gladys Hebe D’Onofrio and Leopoldo Druscovich.

It is at this level that the contrast between mass culture and the high art scene is especially poignant. Looking at the case of Gladys, this distance from and combination with mass culture is marked by her parents’ attitude from the very beginning. Her mother, who has pretentions of being a poet herself, maintains a strong connection with high art and upper class society. She conceives her daughter, who she describes from the very beginning of the novel as an artist like her mother (Buenos Aires 11), after she sees Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Great God Brown*. The narrator explains that, “[d]urante la representación de Clara Evelia Llanos de D’Onofrio sintió renacer su vocación de poetisa, acicateada por el corte vanguardista de la obra” (Buenos Aires 24). On returning
home, Clara rereads Nervo and Darío, idols of hers, and “no pudo evitar la irrupción de dos nombres consagrados que la humillaban: Juana de Ibarbourou y Alfonsina Storni” (Buenos Aires 25). She is an “artist” who fully emerses herself in the realm of sanctified high art. This connection with an elitist vision of art is further emphasized during her pregnancy when, under orders from the doctor, Clara listens to calming music. The music she chooses consists of some of the canonized great artists of the 18th and 19th Centuries, specifically Handel, Sibelius, Mussorgsky, Beethoven, and the Spanish composer Albéniz (Buenos Aires 25).

The attitude of Clara offers a stark contrast to that of her spouse, Pedro Alejandro D’Onofrio. While Clara inhabits the world of elite art, Pedro represents the mass culture side of the relationship. In commenting on the O’Neill play after which Gladys is conceived, the narrator explains that,

Pedro Alejandro D’Onofrio también reaccionó favorablemente a la representación, debido a que ya conocía otras obras del autor, ambas en adaptación cinematográfica. Ese hecho le permitió dialogar desenvueltamente con su esposa, por lo general conocedora de más títulos que él, e incluso durante el debate sintió deseos de participar, pero temió no contar con el vocabulario adecuado: si no hubiese estado presente su esposa se habría aventurado a emitir algún juicio. (Buenos Aires 24)

This passage highlights a few important points. The foremost is that Pedro feels inadequate to his wife’s intellectual pretensions. He takes a subservient position to his wife’s intelligence to such an extent that he dare not utter his own opinions (about intellectual matters at least). In addition to this, Pedro can relate to his wife’s intellect
only through the medium of mass culture. He is able to appreciate the O’Neill play because he has already seen cinematic versions of O’Neill and thus knows what to expect. The mass culture versions that Pedro has experienced open the door to dialogue between Clara’s intellectual consumption of the play and his own experience.

Due to the distinct natures of her parents, Gladys experiences both worlds, that of high art that her mother embraces and that of mass culture which she experiences through her father. It is through these two vehicles of culture (her parents) that Gladys is able to explore her own artistic development. Her mother, after learning from a teacher that Gladys has an aptitude for memorizing poetry, struggles to force her daughter to declaim poetry for her. In the power struggle that follows, Gladys “la miró desafiante y le dijo que la maestra recitaba mejor que Clara Evelia porque era más linda” (Buenos Aires 27). While this episode ended with Clara in tears, she does not give up on her literary aspirations for her daughter. When Gladys begins school, at 6 years old, her mother obliges her to participate in the end of year recital, a large poetic piece. The narrator explains that, “[e]l propósito de Clara Evelia era demostrar que niñas pequeñas podían memorizar y por ende tomar lecciones de declamación” (Buenos Aires 28). It is an experiment that fails horribly when Gladys forgets her lines and Clara has to take over from her. Through these instances, the text communicates that Clara works diligently to turn her daughter into a poet. Clara takes the refinement of high culture and attempts to impart it to Gladys, with only limited success.

Gladys’s father, on the other hand, helps to foment her true artistic skills, those of the plastic arts. The narrator tells that, “[l]a inclinación de Gladys por el dibujo se manifestó desde los primeros grados” (Buenos Aires 29). Gladys develops this
inclination by copying the drawings of the magazine *Rico Tipo* that her father brings home every Thursday. Gladys quickly tires of copying the magazine, however, since the subject is always the same person, simply in different positions. After seeing what is presumed to be “true” art in the notebook of a friend’s sister (who studies at a private art institute), Gladys dedicates herself to,

*dibujar una serie de caras de actrices, segura de lograr un mejor resultado que el obtenido por la hermana de Fanny en un retrato de la actriz cinematográfica Ingrid Bergman realizado con lápices de colores. Gladys dibujó en primer término, pese a que no era una de sus favoritas, a Vivien Leigh, por considerarla la única actriz de parejo prestigio con Ingrid Bergman.* *(Buenos Aires 30)*

This passage also underscores two very important points regarding Gladys aesthetic experience and its connection with mass culture. In attempting to diversify her art, and thus escape the persistent uniformity of subject found in *Rico Tipo*, Gladys recurs to mass culture once again. Initially, Gladys finds an affinity within the work of the art student; that is, mass culture is justified as the subject of art through the other student. Beyond this, however, Gladys also sees a way of becoming a critic herself through her art, completing the Benjaminian thought that mass culture allows the masses to become critics. Gladys’s choice of subject for her first exploration beyond the familiar *Rico Tipo* structure is also very telling. Gladys chooses an actress who is not a favorite, not wishing to belittle a valued person given her doubts in her artistic ability combined with the experimentation of something new. At the same time, she chooses an actress she deems to be on the same level as Ingrid Bergman, in effect dialoguing with the art student who
serves as her inspiration. In effect, Gladys’ development as an artist combines the two paradigms of high and mass culture, producing an act of resistance to these categories.

The question arises then, what is Gladys’s general attitude toward culture? Throughout the text, Gladys demonstrates a clear affinity with mass culture. It is a refuge and a way of experiencing the world. As shown, mass culture provides inspiration from the very earliest days of her artistic creation. In fact, at the same time that she is developing her artistic abilities, the narrator tells that Gladys “[i]ba a la escuela por la mañana y después hacía rápidamente sus deberes para estar libre a las cuatro de la tarde y escuchar la novela de Radio Belgrano con la doméstica” (Buenos Aires 29), after which she proceeds to copy the pictures from Rico Tipo. Gladys’s cosmovision is centered on mass culture to such an extent that she even subsumes her politics to it. On learning of the coup that deposed Perón in 1955, Gladys

se preguntó a sí misma por qué estaba tan contenta de la caída de Perón: porque era un régimen fascista, se contestó, y era preciso recordar lo que Hitler y Mussolini habían sido capaces de hacer en el poder. Gladys además estaba contenta porque sin Perón no había riesgo de que otra vez cerraran la importación de revistas de moda y películas, y su madre no tendría más problema con el personal de servicio. (Buenos Aires 38 – my emphasis)

Perón’s ouster from power signifies, among other things, that foreign mass culture will be easier to access and thus Gladys will be able to consume these products without fear of their disappearing.

Her experience of the United States is similarly tied to mass culture. In describing her time in the US, the narrator explains that, “[a]sí pasaron tres años, durante
los cuales tuvo oportunidad de rever por televisión todas sus películas favoritas – Argeía, La dama de las camelias, Grand Hotel, Fatalidad, Tierna Camarada, Mujeres, etc. . . . “
(Buenos Aires 41). Even her expectations of the ideal North American that Gladys brings with her from Argentina are based largely on her experience of mass culture. She looks for:

a) el joven heredero hipersensible y tiernamente neurótico con el rostro del actor Montgomery Clift; b) el hombre casado, dueño de empresas, de actividad febril, prepotente pero necesitado de comprensión en lo más íntimo, con el rostro de John Kennedy; c) el joven universitario de aspecto deportivo, inexperto, ingenuo y pleno de fe en el futuro, con el rostro de los rubios jugadores de béisbol que en las revistas recomendaban productos comerciales varios. (Buenos Aires 41)

Mass culture is a way for Gladys to experience another world, to familiarize herself with it before experiencing it directly. She uses mass culture as a learning tool, as well as a form of (scripted) self expression.

Even later, once she returns to Buenos Aires, Gladys never fully separates herself from her penchant for mass culture. She remains a fan of fashion magazines, and fantasizes an interview about herself with Harper’s Bazaar (Buenos Aires 105-120). Gladys, through her fantasy, recognizes the ability of mass culture to validate her own status as an artist. The fact that the culture industry promotes a certain vision of her as someone who, “ha pasado a ser una luminaria de las artes plásticas en pocos meses” (Buenos Aires 106) has as much importance, or arguably more, than the accolades of the defenders of traditional art. It is also important to recognize that Gladys seeks this mass culture justification; it fits better with her initial development and her personal vision of
herself as an artist. In short, Gladys utilizes, but also participates with mass culture as a part of her own aesthetic vision.

The development of Leo’s character, however, provides a contrast to the favoritism shown by Gladys towards mass culture. Leo favors an elitist vision of culture. Raised by his sisters with an absent father, Leo grows up in a Spartan atmosphere. In taking charge, his eldest sister Amalia, “pronto impuso su buen sentido administrativo y los cheques que enviaba el padre resultaban sobreabundantes en sus manos. Pero del presupuesto desaparecieron los gastos prescindibles como el cine, los helados, la calesita, las revistas y los regalos para cumpleaños y Reyes” (Buenos Aires 82). All luxuries were cut from the budget, and the foremost of these luxuries were those of mass culture. In addition to the absence of mass culture that is found in Leo’s past, his first work experiences can also be tied to a dislike of “low” cultural production. When he drops out of Architecture school, Leo enters work as an assistant in a fotonovela and comics magazine. After a few months of working there, Leo discovers that his salary has been provided by his sister Olga, at which time he angrily berates her for humiliating him. While he recognizes the good intentions of his sister, nevertheless, Leo rejects the act of charity which, in his eyes, belittled him in relation to his coworkers and it is this feeling of impotence that leads him to reject his sister’s motherly embrace (Buenos Aires 94).

Leo’s feelings of propriety and decorum also affect his decisions regarding his leisure time. In describing his routine, the narrator tells that on Sundays, Leo always chose between the theater (bastion of “high” culture) and the cinema (realm of “mass” culture). It continues to say that, “[s]i no tenía compañía para esa tarde desechaba la idea de ir al teatro porque lo humillaba estar solo en los entreactos, siendo su temor máximo
The theater provides a very public space of consumption where one can show off; it is a social space of interactions, an active space. The cinema, on the other hand, allows the individual to lose himself in the masses, becoming an anonymous shape in the darkness. In describing this dichotomy, Leo’s shame at being alone is connected implicitly with mass culture, thus strengthening the negative image it has for him. It is important to note that this shame is also intimately tied to Leo’s sexuality, connecting impotence (lack of someone to accompany him) with shame and mass culture, and sexuality (a voyeuristic desire for a partner and public recognition) with “high” culture.10

It is also because of his sexuality that Leo initiates his artistic education. Following a bout of pneumonia, Leo is ordered to abstain completely from sexual interaction. In the void, he decides to study the extensive art library in the apartment he is renting. As an alternative focus for his sexual energy, “Leo logró después de mucho tiempo concentrarse en la lectura y las horas pasaban con toda rapidez. En esas semanas leyó y estudió todo lo que encontró sobre artes plásticas y esbozó un programa de visitas a museos europeos durante fines de semana y vacaciones” (Buenos Aires 100). He dedicates himself entirely to the self-study of art and this makes for what he calls the happiest days of his life. “High” art for Leo can take the place of sexual tension and provides a release for him in a way that mass culture, with its connotation of shame never can.

His studies in Europe also set the stage for Leo to attain the position of power and prestige within the art world that will bring him into contact with Gladys and will instigate what Lucille Kerr calls the “‘perfect crime’ because it is a perfect fiction”
Leo eventually comes to be the most influential figure in the art world, at the head of a new magazine which “estaba ya consagrada como la más importante en su género, y era bien sabido que para imponer un producto en el campo plástico, musical, teatral o literario era imprescindible su apoyo” (Buenos Aires 102).

It is in Leo’s nature to be elitist in his taste. The text records his thoughts on taste, stating “sí, tengo que admitirlo, es poco democrático, pero me irrita que algo que a mí me guste mucho se haga popular” (Buenos Aires 125). He goes on to explain his immense irritation at the popularity of Toulouse-Lautrec following a Hollywood film on his life. Leo relishes his position as elitist critic, one who can control what is considered worthy art and what is not. This does not mean that Leo avoids all contact with mass culture. He even expresses interest in seeing the movie Funny Girl, but his contact with mass culture always maintains the line between “true” art and “entertainment”. In the same conversation where Leo mentions Funny Girl, he also comments on another film, “[n]o, es un asco, no la veas. No entendieron a Poe, el episodio de Fellini es el peor, porque es el más pretencioso” (Buenos Aires 139). Mass culture, thus, should always subsume itself to canonized versions of culture for Leo and when it does not, it should be ignored.

As several critics have observed, the psychological and the sexual development of Gladys and Leo seem to indicate a perfect pairing: Leo’s sadism complements Gladys masochism (Kerr Suspended Fictions 137, and less directly in Zapata 366 and Biron 97). As occurs in Boquitas pintadas, Puig explores relations of power based on gender identity. Studies on the psychological or psychoanalytic aspect of the relationship between Leo and Gladys abound; I have chosen to focus on a different aspect of their relationship. It is important to recognize, however, that their relationship and their
personality are driven by constructions of gender identity. Leo is characterized by his potent sexual organ and his combination of violence and sexuality (he cannot find arousal without resistance); he is the epitome of sexual potency and domination. The stability of these categories, however, is brought into questions by Leo’s real crime, the apparent yet unconfirmed murder of the homosexual man whom he rapes.

In contrast to Leo, Gladys does not conform to the idea of passive feminine sexuality. Although she is used by Leo as a prop in his sexual fantasy (unable to resist because he has drugged her), she is in fact a very sexual being. She goes to the United States with the hope of losing her virginity and the text relates her masturbatory fantasies. As Jo Labanyi points out, “[t]he novel shows that the attempt to ground sexuality in the body leads, if one follows Freud’s theories through to their logical conclusion, to the breakdown of the masculine / feminine opposition. Instead Puig proposes a view of sexuality as representation, in which gender is a mobile construct” (113). Puig clearly subverts, or at least questions, the stability of traditional gender roles in the novel, providing two deviant characters in Leo and Gladys.

I would like to take this relationship a step further, however. If we see Leo as the absolute arbiter of culture, as can be seen in his power to single-handedly choose the artist for the Muestra Interamericana (a celebrated international art competition), then the relationship between Leo and Gladys can also take on artistic connotations. In this sense, Leo is the dominating force of traditional “high” culture which seeks to subjugate Gladys hybridization of mass culture and the plastic arts. At the same time, the symbiotic relationship is perpetuated by Leo’s need for rejection in order to overcome his sexual impotence. Seen under the lens of art systems, Leo needs the resistance that Gladys
originally offers to him (that is, the dominating power needs resistance in order to be able to dominate), and when she comes to depend upon him more fully, he seeks to distance himself from her at the same time that he stages the scene in which he can restore the balance of the initial system of power. The novel would ultimately suggest a symbiotic relationship between high and mass culture in which, although they both struggle for acceptance, they also need the other in order to give their own aesthetic contribution value. If there is no mass culture, then the proponents of high culture have nothing on which to base their sense of prestige. Likewise, mass culture would find it impossible to argue for a more democratic, yet aesthetically valid, experience without the strict boundaries of high art.

Just as The Buenos Aires Affair directly explores the connection between the traditional categories of high art and mass culture as a central part of the plot, Puig also explores these same dynamics in the structure of his novels. Despite the fact that Puig has stated directly that his works do not have a great influence from literature, his novels are replete with a variety of narrative techniques both simplistic as well as experimental that place him in dialogue with a literary tradition. Through both the themes of his novels as well as their structure, Puig provides a space where mass culture can be explicitly analyzed. For some, this signifies that Puig is utilizing mass culture as a way of creating literature (a literary appropriation of mass culture), while for others the use of mass culture belittles his narrative, giving it minor or little importance.

In looking at many of Puig’s novels, one can see a direct correlation with popular genres or mass appeal fiction: the serial novel in Boquitas pintadas, the detective story in The Buenos Aires Affair, and the science fiction novel in Pubis angelical. In looking at
all of these novels, it is important to keep in mind what would separate the “light” or mass culture narrative from what can be considered a more complex and literary text.\textsuperscript{14}

The idea of convention and invention as well as form and formula as defined by John Cawelti shed some light on the dynamic of mass culture / high culture in Puig. Cawelti argues that all cultural texts vary on the spectrum between established convention and innovation. All texts use some degree of the familiar or known, stereotypical characters or themes, as well as a certain degree of new, unexpected material. At the same time, these texts also vary between form, defined as “a completely original structure which orders inventions” (“Formula” 119) and formula, defined as a “completely conventional structure of conventions” (“Formula” 119). What the mass cultural text does is to approach the conventional formulaic end of the spectrum while the “literary” text dwells in the invention realm of form. Puig’s novels seem to hover between the two ends of the spectrum that Cawelti describes, incorporating both formula and form, convention and invention.\textsuperscript{15}

In \textit{Boquitas pintadas} (1969), Puig manipulates both the serial novel and the radio in order to both tell his story and examine the psychological dimension of his characters. The serial novel functions as an extradiegetic element that indicates the type of text that Puig seeks to create (or at least to dialogue with).\textsuperscript{16} Puig has stated that \textit{Boquitas pintadas} was written in part to convince an Argentine critic of the value of the serial novel and that mass culture was equal to the products of so called serious literature (Corbatta 593). Puig sees the minor genre as having the ability to utilize formula yet still incorporate invention in the same way that canonized forms of high culture do.\textsuperscript{17} As a pseudo-serial novel, \textit{Boquitas pintadas} clearly identifies with popular culture. The
formulas that Puig interacts with are mainly those of the serial novel, but also its later manifestation, the radionovela. Imitating the radionovelas that the characters listen to, the novel also offers a series of intermingled stories that are separated and continued in various entregas. Seen from another perspective, the serial novel connects with the lower socioeconomic status of Puig’s characters within the novel, who are more likely to consume mass culture than they are Literature.

This direct connection with the serial novel raises the questions about the formulas or patterns that are inherent to this genre and how Puig’s narrative follows but also diverges from these patterns. Jorge Rivera, in a slightly dated study of the serial novel, explains that these novels follow a “formula preferida –destinada, sobre todo, a captar a la mujer ociosa- [que] se esboza sobre las líneas de la novela burguesa, en la vertiente sentimental y aventurera” (15). The serial novel takes as its model the burgeoning adventure or sentimental novel, but does so in a way that conforms to a set formula. This formula, Rivera argues, is shaped by a revindication conflict in which a villain claims the rights of a victim. A hero arrives to fight the villain and restore the victim to his / her rightful place (21-22). This structure is further elaborated by a set of narrative steps that the novel takes: the conflict is described, the hero is commissioned, and the hero and the villain interact (23-24). Rivera also mentions certain stock characters and plots that are typically seen in the serial novel: the betraying mother, magical or metaphysical help, tests of identity, the hidden hero or witness (who learns valuable information), the imprisoned princess, the escape, the sidekick (25-26). Rivera highlights that the serial novel is a highly structured, formulaic construction that borrows from existing format as well as theme.
In talking about the serial novels of the early 20th Century in Argentina, Beatriz Sarlo also emphasizes the formulaic nature of these texts. The serial novels that Puig would be entering into dialogue with are characterized by a repetitive style and simplicity of narration. Sarlo explains that these texts follow a basic chronological structure, avoiding the potentially confusing analepsis or prolepsis associated with a more complex structure. In addition, this simple chronological structure is combined with a simplistic causality, which subordinates all conflict and resolution to a single ideological, social or moral cause. The chronological narration and the system of causality both contribute to a single story line (Imperio 205-209). Sarlo also argues that the formula of the serial novel is a result of its purpose, that of entertaining. She states, “el placer que estas narraciones proporcionan a sus lectores es el del fluir ininterrumpido: fáciles, rápidas, legibles, son la imagen misma de la felicidad narrativa” (Imperio 26).

The theme of the serial novel is clearly tied to its purpose, but also to the intended audience. This audience consisted largely of women, but also men, typically in the lower middle to lower classes (Sarlo Imperio 44).19 It is also a readership that, “carecía de los recursos intelectuales para cultivar sus opiniones y sus juicios, porque ni los diarios ni las revistas que también leía le proporcionaban discursos críticos audibles” (Imperio 52). Thus, the serial novel shows its audience how it should interact with the text. Sarlo goes on to explain that the serial novel does this through a variety of techniques: the length of the text or entrega (shorter texts are easier to get through), themes that are not tied to daily life, preference for sentimental story lines over adventure or historical events, a strong repetitive structure, a single, central conflict, and a universal (or deregionalized) theme (Imperio 59-64).
Boquitas pintadas shares several elements with the serial novel. The central theme of the novel is that of romance and relationship, as well as betrayal and conflict. The novel also toys with a detective story in the second half. In addition to this, the novel consists of short units, which Puig chooses to call entregas, furthering his use of the serial novel.

Puig’s novel also has structural parallels with other forms of mass culture. For instance, the pastiche nature of the novel has led several critics to compare the narrative style to Hollywood B movies of the 1940s (Viviana Gimenez 447, Marjorie Jimenez 62-63), or to a tango (Audrey García 440). The way that mass culture is treated both thematically as well as structurally has also led some critics to categorize the novel as popular or mass culture itself. María Ester Martínez, for instance, argues that:

Boquitas pintadas como toda ficción popular, desde los cuentos folklóricos, de hadas y baladas, hasta llegar a los modernos bestsellers, contiene una estructura que nos pone en contacto con la vida a través de la reflexión indirecta que los personajes y los hechos hacen de sí mismos, y que les permite tomar conciencia de que el ser humano no posee un yo articulado, coherente y racional, sino que en él o en ella coexisten una multitud de modalidades que están en permanente cambio y subdivisión. (117)²⁰

The self identification as serial novel and the mass culture formula that Puig follows in part, both in theme as well as structure, give Boquitas pintadas a strong connection with mass culture.

It is with the romance theme and the use of entregas that the formula of the serial novel ends, however. Stylistically, the narration of the novel is not a clear,
straightforward, simple one that would be characteristic of mass culture. Puig’s novel is replete with analepsis, prolepsis, interior monologue, stream of consciousness and other experimental narrative techniques. In fact, the novel is a pastiche of different texts, all of which compete in the overall narration. What Puig does with Boquitas pintadas is to mesh modern experimental narration with the mass cultural form of the folletín, something which is evidenced by the number of articles dealing with narrative technique in the novel.21

In addition to the more complex language and narrative technique of the novel, it also bears more structural resemblance to a well constructed novel, which contains a certain logical structure, than to the more simplistic focused story line of the folletín or radionovela; that is, the folletín or radionovela centers around one basic story line with few diversions, at the same time reserving the right to stretch this story line indefinitely with haphazard turns and twists. Instead of the chaotic, seemingly random story line of the folletín, Boquitas pintadas is a self-contained, controlled narrative that is very carefully constructed and organized and contains a complex web of interactions, instead of a monolithic story line. Lucille Kerr states that “as it turns out, Boquitas pintadas is in many ways a very controlled text, one whose constituent parts have been carefully articulated by an authorial figure whose own ludic performance and position are brought to light by it” (“Popular Design” 411). Puig’s novel shows much more detail to the culmination of a climax and closure than the radionovela, which can consist of an endless series of build up and deferral of plot.

While it is certainly true that popular fiction can allow the reader to see the multiplicity of perspectives involved in human existence, it does not hold a monopoly on
this. Ester Martínez and other critics simply do not see Puig’s work as being stylistically or narratively complex enough to fall within a more high culture paradigm, perhaps because they confuse the idea of literature with the complex novels of the Boom. As Puig argues, literature does not have to be stylistically or technically complex.

On the other hand, Ellen McCracken argues that Puig utilizes mass culture in order to create high culture. She believes that Puig struggles between the two genres, ultimately giving preference to a high cultural aesthetic. McCracken concludes that the novel, “uses the forms and themes of serialized mass culture to create active readers who compile the novel themselves in a conscious fashion” (29). While I agree with McCracken that Puig seeks a more active reader who will interact with the text, which goes with the discourse of mass culture within the novel, we cannot say that Puig consciously produces high art simply because he obliges the reader to participate. It is more useful to explore what the text does in combining its high and mass cultural elements. One of the effects of this is to create an approachable text (taking into account the accessible vocabulary, despite the experimental narrative techniques), that envisions a mass cultural text in the broadest sense of the term (that is, a text that is available to the masses and is mass consumed) which also facilitates a more sophisticated reading. What Puig does, ultimately, is to combine the spectrum of formula with form, thus creating a unique fiction which allows for critical evaluation of cultural identity and value.

Even more so than with _Boquitas pintadas_, much of the critical attention for _The Buenos Aires Affair_ has focused on the structure and form of the novel, its connection with the movies and with the crime novel. These arguments tend to favor the idea of resistance to the formulas of the highly structured crime novel to bring in to a higher
literary form. Lucille Kerr, for example, states that Puig brings the “low” form of crime novel into the realm of “high” art (Suspended Fictions 131). Taking this argument a step further, Juan Epple talks of sub-literature as a “caballo de Troya” (44) that allows Puig to subvert the structures of mass culture. The deviation from the norm of the crime novel, for these critics is what constitutes resistance and gives Puig the space in which to explicitly examine the structures of mass culture. For some, Puig sees mass culture as a restricting medium that he needs to break out of in order to create “real art”. For Kerr and Epple, Puig basically fits into the Adorno camp; he is only interested in unmasking the negative effects of popular culture through exploring the high art possibilities that they never attain.

The latter argument has some merit. In The Buenos Aires Affair, Puig does play with the conventions of the crime novel in order to subvert it and create a more active and displaced text. Both Epple and Kerr examine in detail the differences between Puig’s crime novel and the mass culture norm of the genre. Summarizing their work, Kerr focuses on two important points regarding the crime novel and Puig. She begins by defining the crime novel as formulaic. She continues by highlighting the displacement from the traditional structures of the crime novel: the most striking example of this is that Puig’s novel is one in which the perceived crime, what Kerr calls the “perfect crime” (Suspended Fictions 133), turns out to be a construction.22 The actual crime, if it could be considered that, is found in the middle and although it is an important element in the development of the action, is not the central focus of the novel. For Kerr, “[t]his displacement turns the novel, as well as its readers, at once away from and toward the
model it names. It both makes present and denies a place to some of the structures and strategies that originally empower the popular form” (*Suspended Fictions* 167).

The other focus of Kerr’s analysis pertains to the figure of the detective. The traditional crime novel follows the investigations of a detective, giving the reader a little information at a time and allowing him / her to participate with the detective in solving the crime. In *The Buenos Aires Affair*, the central detective figure is absent. Kerr states that, “*The Buenos Aires Affair* renders literal the not uncommon figurative connection between the detective and the reader (that is, the detective as a kind of reader or the reader as a kind of detective) as the functions of the one are superimposed on the activities of the other” (*Suspended Fictions* 137). Although it is certainly true that the reader becomes the detective, Puig’s novel presents an even more subtle form of the detective. The actual detective in the novel is neither a traditional crime novel detective nor the reader, but rather the absent figure who edits and compiles the different texts which are brought to the reader. It is at this level that the mystery of the crime (or lack of crime) is developed. Through the careful ordering and occultation of information, the narrator / detective carefully guides the reader, first giving him / her the impression that Gladys is the victim of a brutal murder and setting Leo up as the perfect criminal, then little by little destroying this myth.

The work of Juan Epple’s analysis of the novel complements that of Kerr in many ways. Epple sees the crime novel genre as a “caballo de Troya utilizado por el autor para desmitificar la estructura convencional de la realidad allí reflejada” (44). Mass culture, in other words, is used by Puig to enter unannounced and unauthorized to examine the very substance and limitations of the genre itself. Epple argues that Puig uses these structures
and subverts them (as Kerr shows) in order to create the antithesis of popular literature, “un anti-folletín o una anti-novela policiaca” (45). Through his very careful destabilization of the crime novel, Puig shows the inability of the genre to encompass the real world; that is, mass culture offers a simplistic vision of the world that ignores the rich nuance and complication that life brings with it.

All of the critics who examine The Buenos Aires Affair in relation to the crime novel agree on two things. At no time does the fact that Puig’s novel pertains to “high” art ever come into question. In fact, the criticism to date has no discussion as to whether Puig attempts to transcend the boundaries between “high” and “mass” culture in order to destabilize these strict boundaries, although Kerr admits that “Puig’s novel shows that there may be ways in which the popular form can be turned into the type of text to which it would be initially placed in opposition” (Suspended Fictions 167). The other point that current criticism agrees on regarding The Buenos Aires Affair, is that Puig uses mass culture within his high culture work as a way of resisting the rigid structures of the very same mass culture art form. These critics seem to fall into the same trap that they argue Puig is trying to point out. Because The Buenos Aires Affair is written within the tradition of the crime novel, it has to be either a subversion of mass culture or a formulaic, mass cultural text in its own right. I would argue that Puig, in The Buenos Aires Affair, shows the ability of mass culture to incorporate form and invention, recognizing the traditional composition of the distinction between Literature and sub-literature yet at the same time seeing this as a more nuanced spectrum.

This suggestion is supported by Derek Frost’s view that the novel is a hybrid between literature and film, and that the cinematic aspects of the novel force the reader to
see the novel in cinematic terms (119). Regardless of whether the novel is a cinematic hybrid or not, Frost’s comment underscores the fact that Puig invites the reader to participate with his text, to see the formulas but also the forms of his novel in order to function as a resistance to the strict domination of structure that mass culture can have.

Puig creates texts that allow readers to become actively involved in the same way that he proposes they should in his texts. He promotes an artistic creation that allows the masses to enter in order to explore his aesthetic innovations (many of which Puig shares with the Boom, like stream of consciousness or a continual shift of voice and perception). In short, Puig creates the type of text that will facilitate the active critical stance that he favors from the protagonists in his text. An interview with Jorgelina Corbatta helps shed light on the role of the reader for Puig. He talks of the implicit reader of his novels being one with a certain cinematic sensibility and continues by stating that, “[y]o no quiero decir que tenga en cuenta a un lector tonto, sino a un lector con cierta exigencia de agilidad. Creo que el cine es eso, ante todo, lo que nos ha provocado, una exigencia de agilidad” (593). What Puig looks for in his reader is the same interaction that Benjamin proposes, in which the masses through the text are able to become critics in their own right.

Mass culture for Puig, then, is a site at which the individual must make a choice. He or she may continue down the easy path that the culture industry paves in which thought and volition are provided free of charge. The consumer has another choice however, to break free of the submission involved in the idea of the faceless masses and become a thinking, active individual through conscious interaction with the text. Puig draws the conclusion that mass culture can keep the masses ignorant and passive, but it
may also transform the masses into critics, albeit in many instances the conclusions that these “experts” draw are to say the least unorthodox.

1 For instance, Naomi Lindstrom relates that, “when Puig’s first novels appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many readers were alarmed and appalled by his original utilization of mass-culture allusions and mimicry of popular cultural forms. Some Argentine literary figures expressed anxiety lest literature itself be contaminated by the often simplistic banality of the cultural repertory on which Puig was drawing. Borges, for example, told interviewers that he could never overcome the repugnance he felt at the aggressively pop titles of Puig’s novels” (58)

2 Pope also describes Puig as “an original and innovative writer” whose “story line may not compete with the novels of Dashiell Hammett or Ross Macdonald”, but whose “verbal dexterity is always dazzling” (Pope 267). In other words, Puig is neither sophisticated enough for Pope to be a real author, nor popular enough to be a bestseller like Hammett or Macdonald.

3 In responding to the question of whether literature should shed light on a social situation and if his novels do this, Puig responds, “[l]a experiencia de cierta gente, ciertos valores que pueden ser salvados. El tema de la represión sexual creo que es muy evidente. En The Buenos Aires Affair es el eje” (Sosnowski 79).

4 Martí-Peña identifies seven cultural / social myths that the novel explores: true love, masculine strength and feminine weakness, virginity, marriage, maternity, privacy and eternal youth. She adds that these themes are “subtextos todos ellos del relato folletinesco y pretextos de la dominación masculina dentro del sistema hegemónico patriarcal [y] son re-escritos subversivamente en Boquitas-folletín” (94).

5 Lucile Kerr analyzes the comparisons between the Don Juan tradition and Boquitas pintadas in her study Suspended Fictions (96-104).

6 In a conversation with Mabel, Nené explains that she never listens to the radionovelas (Boquitas 194).

7 Horkheimer and Adorno state that “the deceived masses are captivated by the myth of success more than the successful are” (133-34). In this case, Mabel might be captivated by the myth of success, but Raba’s practicality complicates this strict reading of mass culture as domination.

8 In order to emphasize the fact that she is not completely entranced by the possibility of upper social / economic mobility, Raba continues this passage thinking about, “muchos muchachos buenos y trabajadores que le gustaban” (Boquitas 84).

9 That is, at the level of what happens within the narration.

10 The passage that outlines his preference for the theater when accompanied contains a detailed description of his sexual routine. Shame regarding sexuality is also tied to masturbation for Leo and it is because of this that he stops going to confession (86).

In an interview, Puig states that “no ha habido, creo, influencias literarias muy grandes en mi vida. Ese espacio está ocupado por las influencias cinematográficas” (Corbatta 593). His affirmation of film as a major influence will figure largely in the diverse structure of his novels, from simplistic narration to more complex narrative segments like stream of consciousness. It is perhaps Puig’s statements of an affinity for film, combined with his inclusion of film as an important topos in his novels that lead many critics to see cinematic techniques in his narration to a greater or lesser extent. See Claudia Cabezón Doty, “Literatura y cine latinoamericanos en diálogo intermedial” or Frances Wyers, “Manuel Puig at the Movies” among others.

To get a sample of this, consider Carol Clark D’Lugo and María Ester Martínez. D’Lugo reads El beso de la mujer araña as a way of bringing a mass audience to an acceptance of literary experimentation. D’Lugo argues that, “Puig’s project is to use elements of popular culture to move his readership toward an acceptance of experimental techniques and unconventional themes” (235). At the same time, María Ester Martínez classifies Boquitas pintadas as popular literature as opposed to overly pretentious narrative (117).

This is still important whether one discards the notion of literature and “low culture” or not given the way that Puig treats these genres.

Cawelti goes on to articulate his ideas on formula and popular culture in his book Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture.

Extradiegetic should be understood as a part of the novel which is not involved with the actual story taking place. In this case the structure and the intertexts of the novel all function as extradiegetic elements.

It is important to recognize that Hollywood is also capable of this mix of formula and innovation, which is a part of what Puig would like to show.

Although Rivera analyzes the 19th Century European serial novel, his analysis of the formulas of the genre can be seen in Sarlo’s later analysis of the Argentine serial novel of the 1930s and is also presented and contrasted in Puig’s works.

It is important to emphasize that this is a group that for the Mexican Onda authors held little interest. While Puig focuses on the lower socioeconomic classes, the Onda authors focused their narratives on the upper middle classes with pretensions of upper social mobility.

Martinez goes on to make a distinction between popular fiction, which is simple and structured, from “una escritura más pretenciosa” (117) which presumably are flawed by overt attention to language and style. The fact is that Puig’s narrative combines what Martinez calls pretentious fiction with the formula of mass culture.


This is a point that various critics cite as an important element of Puig’s plot, although most come to more or less the same conclusion, that Puig manipulates the forms of mass culture in order to show its limitations. See René Campos, “Novela policial, film noir y The Buenos Aires Affair,” and Juan Epple, “The Buenos Aires Affair y la estructura de la novela policiaca” for more detailed accounts of this crime construction.
Chapter 4

North American Dreams and Twilight Zone Realities:

Alberto Fuguet and Rodrigo Fresán

In looking at the changes that occur between the time when the Mexican Onda authors and Manuel Puig were writing and when the contemporary authors Alberto Fuguet and Rodrigo Fresán publish, one could argue that there is a general critique of centralized structures of authoritarian power at many different levels. Politically, both Argentina and Chile see a transition from authoritarian dictatorships in the 1970s to more democratic forms of government in the 1980s and 1990s. Additionally, economic policies in Latin America generally tend to become less nationally centered and protectionist (as is the case with the Import Substitution Industrialization policies of the 60’s and 70’s) and are replaced with neoliberal free market policies. These neoliberal policies have ramifications for the culture industry in Latin America. From its introduction in Argentina in 1951 and Chile in 1959, television has gone from largely public ownership to the private sector. Dianne Johnson examines the evolution of media ownership and finds that in connection with the shift from public to private, media outlets also shift from domestic ownership to foreign and there is an increasing concentration of media outlets in a few corporations (127-34). Although Dianne Johnson argues that Latin American media structures become increasingly less connected to national government and more dependent on foreign influences through the deregulation process, she concludes that “the state can balance the loss of sovereign control through its regulation
of the media. Thus despite the very real influence of international trends, domestic factors remain important in public policymaking” (138-39).

In conjunction with the opening of economic markets and the destabilization of authoritarian political power, one sees an increased concern with the very idea of national identity in a postmodern context. It is this concern that prompts Norbert Lechner to observe that “postmodern disenchantment usually expresses itself precisely as a loss of faith in the state. The state is perceived, more than anything else, as an apparatus of domination, always suspected of seeking totalitarian control” (130). For his part, Néstor García Canclini also sees the globalizing postmodern state of Latin America as one in which national identity and boundaries are destabilized as well. He proposes that, “América Latina se está quedando sin proyectos nacionales. La pérdida de control sobre las economías de cada país se manifiesta en la desaparición de la moneda propia (Ecuador, El Salvador), en sus devaluaciones frecuentes (Brasil, México, Perú, Venezuela) o en la fijación maníaca al dólar (Argentina)” (Culturas XVI). He later theorizes that, “postmodern identities are transterritorial and multilingual. They are structured less by the logic of the state than by that of markets” (Consumers 29).

It is also important to recognize that not all theorists view this shift from national to transterritorial postmodern identity as a positive thing. Beatriz Sarlo, in Escenas de la vida posmoderna, describes postmodern life as, “[v]einte horas de televisión diaria, por cincuenta canales, y una escuela desarmada, sin prestigio simbólico ni recursos materiales; paisajes urbanos trazados según el ultimo design del mercado internacional y servicios urbanos en estado crítico” (5). The postmodern experience that Sarlo describes is one saturated in mass culture, where economic means determine consumption and
critical thinking takes a secondary role to passive consumption. It is the culture of television, zapping, videos games and the flow of information. Additionally, Santiago Colás has argued that what separates a postmodern sensibility from a modern worldview is precisely the relationship that each maintains with mass culture; modernism defines itself in opposition to mass culture, while postmodernism seeks a blending or fusion with it (ix). No matter the position they take, most theories of postmodern cultural production must take into account the importance of mass culture in daily life and how the individual reacts to this state of increased availability of information and mass culture products.

What becomes evident in looking at the narratives of Alberto Fuguet and Rodrigo Fresán in the context of globalization and postmodernity is their preoccupation with the idea of personal identity (both in relation to the local / national as well as the cosmopolitan / global) in a way that discards the older preoccupation with systems of power involved in the Onda cultural imperialist dialogue or Puig’s exploration of gender structures. What Fuguet and Fresán express through their exploration of mass culture in the globalized milieu is the power of mass culture in a postmodern context to perpetuate the status quo through a feeling of false advocacy or through a feeling of apathy and lack of control. In essence, mass culture for these authors fills the void brought about by the destabilization of the various structures of power.

Alberto Fuguet initially received much attention due to his rejection of the Boom in general and magical realism specifically as a valid form of expression for his generation of Latin American writers. In the introduction to the anthology McOndo, Fuguet explains that many Latin Americans live in a social and historical context that is fully entrenched in the postmodern world that Sarlo and Colás speak of, which is also
part of the globalizing trend. As Fuguet states, the McOndo writers, “son post-todo: post-moderno, post-yuppie, post-comunismo, post-babyboomers, post-capá de ozono. Aquí no hay realismo mágico, hay realismo virtual” (McOndo 14). Another aspect that Fuguet highlights is the fierce individuality of the narratives. He explains that “[l]os cuentos de McOndo se centran en realidades individuales y privadas. Suponemos que ésta es una de las herencias de la fiebre privatizadora mundial . . . estos escritores preocupan menos de su contingencia pública y estuvieran retirados desde hace tiempo a sus cuarteles personales. No son frescos sociales ni sagas colectivas” (McOndo 13).

The process that Fuguet describes is not so much a transition from national to individual, public to private narratives, but rather a transition away from narratives that attempt to understand the national experience to ones that describe the conjoint processes of postmodernism and globalization. Néstor García Canclini would describe this process as a loss of the national, replaced by the global. In a quote that is appropriate in light of the McOndo narratives, Garcia Canclini states that, “[c]ulture becomes a process of multinational assemblage, a flexible articulation of parts, a montage of features, that any citizen in any country, of whatever religion or ideology can read and use” (Consumers 17-18).

McOndo does not pretend to be totalizing social narratives, but rather to focus on the individual experience.

While Fuguet claims a new aesthetic in Latin American literature, his works have a high degree of affinity with both the narrative of Manuel Puig as well as the Mexican Onda. Various critics have signaled this comparison. Kelly Hargrave and Georgia Seminet connect the mcondistas with the Mexican Onda and Puig (16). Christian Gundermann compares the use of sexuality and mass culture in the texts of Puig and
Fuguet, noting the similarity of subject and use (31). Fellow mcondista, Edmundo Paz-Soldán also makes the comparison between Fuguet, Puig and the Onda, stating:

La obra de Fuguet, que tiene relaciones de continuidad con la obra de autores como Manuel Puig en la exploración del paisaje pop en Latinoamérica, rompe con otro tipo de narrativa que trabajó ese paisaje, la de la Onda en México o la de Skármeta en su propio país: la contracultura utópica ha dado paso a la aceptación –a ratos incómoda- del momento neoliberal. (“Escritura” 45)

It is even a comparison that these writers invite; Fuguet states in an interview that, “[c]reo que Manuel Puig es el padre de McOndo” (Hargrave and Seminet 19), and Fresán includes Eric Zolov’s book, _Refried Elvis_, which speaks to both the literary as well as the broader Onda movement, in his list of acknowledgements at the end of _Mantra_. One of his protagonists, Carlos Carlos, wants to be an Ondero and quotes the Locos del Ritmo anthem “Yo no soy un ‘rebelde sin causa’” (342).

What is missing from the discussion regarding Fuguet and Fresán, however, is a detailed examination and comparison of the uses of mass culture for the Onda and Puig in relation to these contemporary authors. In looking at Fuguet’s literary production, initially the comparison with the Onda writers is particularly striking. Fuguet writes of youth rebellion and inundates his novels _Mala Onda_ (1991) and _Por favor rebobinar_ (1994) with images of youth engaging in sex, listening to US rock music and watching US films, as well as taking drugs, especially cocaine. His protagonists are upper middle to upper class, and many times never venture out of their own isolated areas of the city. As also occurs with the Onda writers, these youth display a marked irreverence, rejecting authority figures, both national and familial. Like the Onda writers, Fuguet expresses a
generational ethos that takes into account youth experiences in Chile during the 1980s and 1990s, which includes the cliché of sex, drugs and rock and roll.⁵

As a part of this specifically upper middle class generational ethos, the protagonists in Fuguet’s novels struggle with their own identity, especially as it pertains to youth and childhood as well as to outside influences. The characters in Fuguet’s novels wander without direction. His first novel, Mala onda, begins with the narrator, Matías, preparing to return to Chile after a school trip to Brazil. The distance involved in the school trip creates a space in which Matías can examine his national identity, something that Fuguet expresses in an interview, stating, “el tipo tuvo que salir para volver a ver sus relaciones personales y el país, para darse cuenta que sus amigos, sus padres y el gobierno iban de mal en peor” (García Corales 289).⁶ As Matías prepares to return to his mundane life, he expresses his disillusionment through a mass culture metaphor:

Es como si hubiera pasado de todo y al final, nada: como si todo el hueveo y la farra y esos días en Río con la Cassia y la playa y el trago y el jale y todo, se quebrasen. Como si, de puro volado, hubiera apretado record en vez de play y después cachara que mi cassette favorito se borró para siempre: quedan los recuerdos, seguro; hasta me sé la letra, pero nunca más volveré a escucharlo.

Cagué. Estoy de vuelta, estoy en Chile. (37)

This dissatisfied, apathetic reaction is juxtaposed with the historical moment at which the novel occurs. Mala onda takes place immediately before the plebiscite in 1980. This referendum was a crucial moment in Chilean history, as the country was able to vote for the first time since Augusto Pinochet took power in 1973. The plebiscite would approve
a new constitution, which gave the President broad powers, to replace the one from 1925. After it was approved, this constitution ultimately allowed Pinochet’s government to maintain power for another eight years. The political climate provides a background to the novel, yet the reaction of Matías and the other protagonists is also revealing. As Ivonne Cuadra points out, the social class to which Matías belongs is precisely the sector of society that allows Pinochet to maintain his power (58-59). In addition to this, Matías and his peers have little or no memory of the Allende government and subsequent coup that placed Pinochet in control. For them, the dictatorial state under which they live is normal.

Nearly all critics agree that Matías and the other protagonists in the novel live isolated in their upper class neighborhoods, finding little connection with the rest of the city nor with the rest of the nation. Matías connects more with his North American dreams than he does with his Chilean reality. Chile and Santiago are the fusion of North American culture as status symbol within a limited geographic and socio-economic space. Thus, Matías is well versed on the music of the Bee Gees and Rod Stewart, as well as symbols of economic status through consumption of foreign luxury products. Although less pronounced than in Por favor, rebobinar, or Las películas de mi vida, the narrator of Mala onda feels the need to classify items with their brand name, typically foreign, in an effort to highlight the level of his consumption. Chocolate syrup is not chocolate syrup but rather Nestle and one does not get gas at a gas station, but rather at a Seven Eleven. Foreign goods are equated with quality while national production and goods are seen as less valuable or inauthentic. Matías takes this position to the extent that he relates an experience of the Pumper Nic:
El aroma a papas fritas, a grasa, me penetra. Me gusta. Es el olor de Estados Unidos, pienso. Olor a progreso. Me acuerdo del Paz, me acuerdo de Orlando y Disneyworld, de Miami, del McDonald’s y el Burger King y el Kentucky Fried Chicken y el Carl Jr. y el Jack in the Box. El Pumper Nic –el nombre me parece patético, demasiado tercermundista- no está tan mal pero es una mala copia, eso está claro. No es auténtico. (106-07)

For these young Chileans, progress is conformity with the ultimate symbol of North American influence and globalization, McDonald’s. The Chilean version cannot compete with the “authentic” experience of North American fast food. In the realm of mass culture, this is emphasized by the complete lack of Latin American products; the only Latin American musician that referred to in the novel is mentioned by the American surfer Rusty Ratcliff. Through his reflections on consumption, Matías is constantly looking outward to find worth and meaning; the foreign replaces the local for him.

This outward gaze applies to political discourse in the novel as well, showing the apathy that Matías feels towards the upcoming plebiscite specifically and political matters in general. In one of the many scenes at Juancho’s, Matías reflects at length about music. After this, Alejandro Paz, the barman who adores the United States, asks about the plebiscite, to which Matías says he will not vote because he is not of age. Paz presses him, to which Matías responds, “[t]endría que pensarlo” (67). His unwillingness to attend to the political realm is emphasized by the way that he approaches literary texts as well. As Cristián Opazo argues, Matías “busca libros donde los desvíos de la disciplina familiar sean referencias a sus propios desvíos y no representaciones de las crisis (políticas y teleológicas) que se observan en el nivel macroscópico de la sociedad...
chilena de 1980” (83). Matías puts more effort into understanding mass culture than he does in participating in any sort of national process. Mass culture is a symbol for the idealized United States as one end of the value spectrum, where Chile inhabits the lower end. He in fact states that the United States is, “un país donde todo pasa, donde nadie te ubica ni te juzga, cero opiniones, un sitio donde es simplemente imposible aburrirse” (65). The United States becomes a type of locus amoenus for Matías, an unrealistic dream vision of perfection. This dream allows him to distance himself from his actual situation and lose himself in his construction of the foreign.

The dream vision of North America that Matías holds contrasts starkly with that of Chile as a backwards, retrograde country. After returning from Rio de Janeiro, Matías expresses his regret at coming back (47), and he later emphasizes his dislike of Chile, stating, “[o]jalá Santiago tuviera freeways, piensas, y carreteras donde picar; podrías sacarle a este Accord de tu vieja unos cien, o ciento diez. Pero Santiago está en Chile y lo único que hay son tréboles rascas y rotondas interminables e inútiles, plagadas de autos que dan vueltas y vueltas y vueltas” (58). Chile is described by its lack of infrastructure and access. As Agustín Pastén argues, “[t]hroughout the entire novel, the adjective ‘chileno/a’ is utilized every time the first person narrating voice wishes to attach a negative quality onto an object or reality” (10). Matías rejects the local as stagnant and backward, favoring the global, in his glorification of North American rock and film, as the symbol of progress and success. Through his experience of Brazil, Matías is able to see the status quo in Chile as something undesirable but he cannot make the intuitive leap to connect the Pinochet regime with Chile’s inferior status.
Lynell Williams sees this as an articulation of the cultural imperialist argument, that North American cultural goods are “colonizing” Matías’s Santiago (18). While there is a definite preference for North American cultural goods and a decided rejection of local production, the novel does not portray this as simple cultural imperialism. There is a marked critique of the upper class and their conspicuous consumption. However, the rejection of the local in favor of the global has more to do with the general apathy and lack of strong national identity (that is, it is a byproduct of the loss of national identity that García Canclini connects with postmodernism) than any effect of the hegemonic practices of the North American culture industry. The lack of direction or national identity for the upper class Matías is expressed through his sense of apathy and void of purpose. The title of the novel Mala onda describes Matías emotional state in the novel. At one point, this apathetic state reaches such a point that Matías rejects even the act of thinking:

Sigo aburrido, lateado. Incluso pensar me agota. Esto lo tengo más que asumido y me preocupa. Pensamiento me ataca, conversación en la que me enfrasco, opinión que escucho, párrafo que leo, todo me da lo mismo, todo me agobia, es angustiante y me molesta. Estoy aburrido, apestado. No me atrevo a pensar. Pensar me da ideas. (176)

It is clear that Matías struggles with a sense of purpose in the novel, many times appealing to foreign mass culture as a more authentic form. North American music, movies and television allow Matías to escape his own insecurity.

He finds a sense of superiority through his knowledge of US mass culture, showing ample evidence that he works towards a mastery of this subject. Matías goes to
the local record store, Circus, to review the Billboard charts, he reads the Village Voice and Rolling Stone magazine when he can, and prides himself on his facility with mass culture. He even uses this informal knowledge as a way of belittling the school experience in general and his English professor specifically. Matías states that, “[s]é más que la profesora, que nunca ha escuchado un disco, nunca ha leído la Rolling Stone” (196). While US mass culture gives Matías a way of improving his feeling of self-worth, it also gives him a way to distance himself from the local context in which he finds himself.

Matías idealized dream vision of the United States is complicated by his interactions with American surfer Rusty Ratliff, who is integrated into the group of Matías friends. While Matías values US mass culture, he has less use for Americans themselves. He even complains of the others’ idolization of Rusty, stating “[Nacho] se cree que estando a su lado y cerca del Rusty, que es todo rubio y yanqui, sube de nivel, mejora su cotización, aumenta sus probabilidades de trascender” (179). Matías conveniently ignores the fact that through his “expertise” in North American culture he essentially does the same thing. Matías also notices “cómo la Maite y la Pía y la Flavia Montessori . . . observan al Rusty como si fuera un ídolo pop” (181) and he later observes how Rusty exploits his position as exotic other: “hablabas con ese acento que sabe explotar tan bien y se sacudía el pelo como si fuera el único en la tierra con una melena así” (184). In addition to being the exotic American, Rusty also has the benefit of having a “bad boy” mystique; at one point, one of Matías’s group of friends explains that Rusty was expelled from Spain for burning a professor’s car.
For Matías, it is not proximity to the United States in general, but rather knowledge of American pop culture that has value. On a more basic level, Rusty also represents for Matias what he cannot be. While Matías can acquire knowledge of the United States, perpetuating his ideal dream vision, he cannot be a part of the United States like Rusty. This gives Rusty an edge, and makes Matías jealous of him. It is a point that is accentuated by Rusty, when he explains who Charly García is by dismissively stating, “Latin Americans like him” (227). Rusty manifests his distance from Latin America in a way that Matías can never hope to achieve. While Matías might belittle his native country and immerse himself more in foreign mass culture than in his national identity, he will always be perceived as Latin American. Thus, his jealousy over Rusty is due more to his own feelings of inadequacy due to his inability to “authentically” be American than it is to any dislike of the United States itself.

Given his fascination with the United States and its culture, it comes as little surprise that Matías eventually finds his missing sense of purpose and belonging through the Salinger novel, Catcher in the Rye. A gift from another self proclaimed American expert, Alejandro Paz, Matías initially rejects the novel, not wanting to read it. When he finally does open its pages, it is a complete revelation for him: “[a]noche conocí a Holden Caulfield. Fue algo químico, absolutamente arrollador. No podía creerlo. Ya no estaba tan solo, me sentí menos mal. Había encontrado un amigo. Mi mejor amigo. Había encontrado un doble” (233). Matías finds an affinity with the rebellious youth from Salinger’s novel, and as María Nieves Alonso argues, with the Caulfieldesque figure of rocker Josh Remsen (23). It is not an illogical pairing, as in fact Matias and Caulfield do have a lot in common. Both are wandering as self proclaimed outcasts in their own
society and both are looking for a way to give their lives meaning. His “discovery” of Caulfield and the further breach that he feels with his family will lead Matías to leave his home. The fact that when he flees, Matías chooses to take only his copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* and his valium are evidence of both his naïveté as well as the things he values most, the ideal of rebellion found in Holden Caulfield and his chemical dependency.

The rupture with Matías’s family, however, is tinged with his own selfishness and reliance on his upper class upbringing. Matías cannot completely discard his social class, something that quickly becomes evident in his bus journey which takes him further and further from the familiar geography which he knows so well. As Matías travels away from his center, he grows increasingly uncomfortable in midst of Santiago’s lower economic sectors. His journey through Santiago also emphasizes his feelings of not belonging. He explains that, “yo sólo miraba por la ventana, como si hubiera sido un turista perdido en una aerolínea equivocada” (285). Matías is the tourist, there to see the sights, but to later return to more familiar scenes. He even carries his stereotypes of the poor with him, imagining that one of his co-passengers is carrying a knife and is simply waiting to kill him. It is not until Matías returns to the upper class neighborhoods that he can relax and regain his sense of superiority, stating, “[c]ivilización, pienso” (288).

The ending of the novel accentuates the position that Matías finds himself in. He has returned to the familiar world of upper class accommodation and is happy to passively exist in this context, essentially giving up his rebellion and returning to the familial home.¹⁰ His attitude, which embraces the stable yet distasteful life with his family instead of the rebellious call for action, is paralleled in his reflections on the referendum. Matías highlights the passivity of his actions, stating:
El Sí ganó con un 67,6 por ciento, y eso que nadie en la familia tuvo ánimo ni
fuerzas para ir a votar. La Alameda, por cierto, se llenó de gente que salió a
celebrar frente al edificio Diego Portales . . . Demasiada gente, montones de
familias con niños y abuelos salieron a las calles a celebrar el futuro, a brindar por
la seguridad, por la promesa de que ya nada malo vendrá. / Ojalá sea verdad. En
serio. Me gustaría creer que, ahora que la cosa se apaciguó, lo que nos espera es
la calma. (333)

Civic (and in Matías case, familial) tranquility is more important than belief or morality
and Matías is happy to resume his position as a pseudo-victim of domination if it ensures
stability. He even does so with the hope that the future will be better. In the end,
according to Matías, what matters is that, “[s]obreviví, concluyo. Me salvé. / Por ahora”
(335).11

Matías behavior is reminiscent of the situation described by Slavoj Žižek. From a
Marxist perspective that is heavily influenced by Lacan, Žižek describes the way in
which apparatuses of resistance actually work to maintain the status quo, giving the
individual the impression of being proactive. In describing the postmodern state, what he
calls the stage of cultural capitalism, Žižek states that, “ideology functions more and
more in a fetishistic mode as opposed to its traditional symptomat mode” (First as
Tragedy 65). For Žižek, the fetish serves to enable the rational realist subject to confront
a reality which does not conform to his/her ideological stance. The fetish becomes a
form of escapism, allowing the individual to project his / her “real” self into the fetish,
disavowing the more common experiences. In this sense, fetish is understood more as an
ideological apparatus not always embodied in a material possession rather than the object
itself. To highlight this idea, Žižek uses the example of Starbucks and its advertising. He argues that:

The “cultural” surplus is here spelled out: the price is higher than elsewhere since what you are really buying is the “coffee ethic” which includes care for the environment, social responsibility towards the producers, plus a place where you yourself can participate in communal life (from the very beginning, Starbucks presented its coffee shops as an ersatz community). And if this is not enough, if your ethical needs are still unsatisfied and you continue to worry about the Third World misery, then there are additional products you can buy. (First as Tragedy 53-54)

Thus, the fetish for the consumer is the well intentioned benefits of buying “green” that allows the consumer to ignore the actual consumptive practices and the potential exploitation (both of employees as well as the environmental impact) that goes along with the consumer culture. One can feel good about oneself for promoting a more equitable world through purchasing fair trade coffee at Starbucks, knowing that Starbucks cares for the environment and the people who work the land, without ever taking the more proactive stance of actually combating exploitation where it does exist.

This process also serves as a way of replacing the “real” experience with the fetish even if the individual is aware of the artificiality of the fetish and the situation from which it arises. Žižek gives the example of the death of a loved one. The fetish, “is the lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth” (In Defense 296), yet one “rationally fully accept[s] this death” (In Defense 296). Žižek posits that “[f]etishists are not dreamers lost in their own private worlds, they are thoroughly ‘realists,’ able to accept the
way things effectively are—since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality” (In Defense 296). Thus, the fetishist sees the “real” world as it is, yet creates the fetish in order to cope with this reality. This does not mean that the individual is not aware of the reality from which they are escaping nor that one is unaware of the very fetish that one uses. For Žižek, the “resistance” to an exploitative capitalist culture is a mask which allows the consumer to have the impression of actively combating the domination of the system while at the same time it perpetuates the status quo.

In the end, Matías’s deviation from national culture provides little more than an escape valve for him that allows the status quo to continue. While Matías fetishization of North American culture does not have any political overtones for him, it clearly provides a space where Matías can criticize the position of Chile as marginalized while maintaining the status quo through his symbolic “rebellious” consumption. This fetish also allows Matías to rebel against his family and at the end of the novel return to it. At the same time, in showing a preference for North American culture and consumption as his fetish, Matías separates himself from any political discourse, allowing the dictatorship to run its own course. As José Leandro Urbina states,

La dictadura la sienten [los personajes jóvenes en la novela] como una especie de molestia, como modelo de conducta antagónico a algunas de sus conductas juveniles, pero saben al mismo tiempo que ella le ha permitido a su clase redefinirse, reconstruir su imagen amenazada en los años de lucha social y reconocerse como parte de un proceso en el que vuelven a ser los agentes de cambios fundamentales. (89)
Matías rebellion, both from his literal as well as his symbolic family, is a very controlled rebellion which in the end is nothing but a form of domination. His North American dream allows his Chilean reality to continue unchanged.

Fuguet’s second novel can be seen as a continuation of the themes found in Mala onda. Por favor, rebobinar is a novel that tells the intertwined stories of twenty and thirty year old residents of Santiago who are also struggling with their entry into adulthood. The novel begins with an epigraph from Gertrude Stein which talks of adolescence lasting for the first twenty nine years of life. The protagonists of Por favor have one foot in adolescence and one foot in adulthood, and in many cases this liminal position drives the novel. As an integral part of the plot, mass culture in Por favor serves to distinguish between two distinct modes of interaction: that of a critic who passively takes in what occurs around them, or that of actively engaged creators.

The first vignette is the one that is most intimately tied to mass culture. In this chapter, video shop employee Lucas utilizes mass culture vocabulary to explore his life, portraying himself as a critic. Film and one’s reaction to film are the central part of Lucas’s own experiences. As occurs in Mala onda, this leads to largely foreign, North American references in an attempt to highlight the global and downplay the local.14 As Edmundo Paz Soldán explains, “Lucas no sólo está colonizado por los Estados Unidos, sino también por la forma del medio cinematográfico” (“Escritura” 46). Film constitutes Lucas’s reality, thus he tells his story as a film. The novel opens with the comment, “[e]stá claro: soy un extra en mi propia vida. No he tenido dirección, me he confundido con los decorados, mi personaje no aparece siquiera en los créditos. / Necesito un agente. Rápido. Cuanto antes” (15). Lucas finds his life meaningless, in much the same way as
Matías in *Mala onda*. The underlying explanation for Lucas’s apathy is what he sees as a lack of control. Throughout the section, Lucas compares his own situation with what he sees in film or television. It is this comparison which forms the basis for Lucas’s theory of the life/film in which he envisions a fusion of lived “reality” and a mass cultural medium. The life/film becomes the imagined cinematic version of one’s life, a mass culture possibility in which the boundary between life and film is eliminated. What Lucas is missing in his life/film is the guiding force that will allow him to be an active participant. He states that, “una vida es como un guión. Lo que necesito es un director” (17). He sees his life / film, however, as at best a B movie. In emphasizing his lack of self-esteem through the life / film theory, Lucas also compares his vision of the afterlife in which he juxtaposes the film of his own life with that of a schoolmate: “[m]i vida está en la sala VI, la más pequeña de todas. En la I proyectan la de un tipo que estuvo en mi colegio y que se agarraba todas las minas. Me fijo que esa cinta tiene calificación para mayores de 18 años. En rigor, dice NC-17 porque el mall está en el cielo sobre Miami o algo así” (21). His life merits only the smallest of theaters, while his classmate’s life contains those things that attract an audience, presumably sex, meriting the NC-17 rating.

Later, Lucas expands on the life / film theory, explaining his lack of self worth by stating, “[s]i alguien realmente quisiera filmar mi vida, tendría que convencerme que, en efecto, el material disponible no sólo es interesante sino universal” (63). It is telling that Lucas posits his life story as needing to be not only interesting, but universal. This demonstrates his need to distance himself from the local to be immersed in the global. It is for this very reason that Lucas adds, “[s]i bien nunca he pisado los Estados Unidos, me encantaría que la película sobre la historia de mi vida se filmara en USA, con actores
yanquis . . .” (64). His individual story must be transposed to a North American context in order to have global appeal.

Not only does Lucas see his own life as movie, but the self proclaimed pathological cinephile filters all of his experiences through the lens of mass culture. This occurs to such an extent that he evaluates his interpersonal relationships through cultural tastes. At one point, Lucas confesses that, “[t]engo la mala costumbre de juzgar a la gente por sus libros y discos. Es algo que no puedo evitar y tiene algo compulsivo, lo reconozco. Entro a una casa y voy directo a la biblioteca a scanear qué libros tienen. Si puedo, abro y miro el refrigerador” (45). An individual’s value is connected to his / her taste in a modification of Pierre Bordieu’s theory regarding social status and taste. If one has “sophisticated” taste regarding mass culture, then this person is someone with whom it would be worthwhile to associate. Sophistication in this case is understood as taste that conforms to Lucas’s own taste. As the expert, he is able to dictate what constitutes good taste and what does not. It is for reasons of taste that Lucas despairs of his therapy sessions. He explains that, “[d]urante una de las primeras sesiones que tuve con él, hablamos sólo de cine. Quedé destrozado porque me di cuenta que la única persona con la que podía contar, el tipo al que le había confiado mi destino, no sabía nada de cine” (36). He cannot trust a therapist who knows nothing about film.

What Lucas does admit is his participation in a postmodern world in which experience is saturated with information. He states that, “[p]arte de mi problema radica en la información. En el exceso de información, mejor dicho. Sé demasiadas cosas que no debería y no sé demasiadas cosas que me hacen falta” (20). Lucas has become a proverbial fount of useless information, which leads him to describe himself as a critic.
Lucas is careful to make the distinction between critic, which he sees as a passive stance lacking control, and film writer or director. Lucas states, “[s]oy un maestro del zapping, de la cultura de la apropiación. Digamos que afano, pirateo, robo sin querer . . . No soy un tipo creativo. No invento, absorbo. Trago. No soy –ni seré- un cineasta. Tampoco un guionista” (22). The critic takes from others and patches together while the film maker invents and creates. It is a gap which Lucas does not believe himself capable of crossing. Although he would like to, he has neither the creative capacity, nor the drive to take an active role in his own life. He tried to break out of his regimented routine, creating something new. In therapy, Lucas admits that, “lo que pasa es que me hastié de ser un espectador pasivo y decidí actuar. Tomar la acción en mis manos” (27). This decision leads to Lucas burning down the family home and as a result attending his compulsory therapy sessions. When Lucas tries to discard his passive role, it backfires horribly, leading him to return to his passive lifestyle.

Despite his retreat to passivity, Lucas maintains the ideal of freedom and choice. He starts the novel expressing his desire to remake his life, but at the same time it is a reactive rather than a proactive stance. He explains that, “estoy en un punto intermedio de mi vida. No sé exactamente cuál es, pero sé que es un momento de transición más que de decisión” (15), and later continues by stating that his first objective is to erase the past. The point of transition in which Lucas finds himself also demonstrates the point at which he allows himself to create, but also to be guided by mass cultural patterns.

In the end Lucas surrenders himself to his passive fate, admitting that more control would be nice. The section ends with an act of submission, “[m]e desespero y agarro el control-remoto y el zapping se apodera de mí por completo” (74). Because of
his intense feeling of lack of control, Lucas allows mass culture to take over his existence. Although in the end, he recognizes his own passivity, the idea of the critic serves as a fetish for Lucas, allowing him to feel advocacy in determining taste. It also leaves him devoid of that very advocacy in his own life. He will forever be the critic, forced to evaluate the work of others and conform to their vision, rather than the film director who actively creates.

The highly successful rock star and film actor, Pascal Barros, gives a counterexample to Lucas as someone who is also intimately involved with mass culture, but focuses on the creative side. Barros is described as the “futuro del rock and roll” (85). Given his fame and connections, Barros has the opportunity to film a pseudo-biographical film; that is, due to his unique position within the culture industry, Barros is able to achieve a marriage of life and film that goes beyond Lucas’s theorization. While Lucas envisions the life/film as a theoretical concept, Barros is able to make it a reality. Barros’s position is also one which allows him to edit his film to better fit his own needs.

The film relates the adolescence of the protagonist, Mark (Barros’s alter ego), in the United States and his subsequent immigration to Chile. In both countries, Mark is involved in the music scene as a member of a band in California and then as a solo act in Chile. The movie chronicles Mark’s rise to fame, including the baggage that comes along with this: money, drugs and women. More than this, however, the film shows how Mark attempts to come to terms with his initial reason for leaving the States, his involvement in a gang rape in California. Throughout the planning of the film, the separation between the “facts” of Barros life and the “fiction” of the movie are blurred. Barros concludes a letter to Luc Fernández, who will be directing the film, with the
confessional statement: “¿Quieres saber lo que realmente pasó? / Violamos a la tipa en masa. Tratamos de hacerla pedazos. Y me gustó. Pero después, dos de ellos trataron de violarme a mí” (304). Thus, mass culture becomes a way for Pascal to escape his own past, by utilizing the nebulous barrier between fact and fiction inherent in the semi-autobiographical film. Barros, as part of the mass cultural establishment, is able to absolve himself of his guilt over the gang rape that occurred in California, by projecting it onto his fictionalized self. Mass culture, then, can work as a catharsis, at least for those within the culture industry itself.

While Barros does not take the same passive stance that Lucas has regarding mass culture, one could still see his actions in light of the theory of Žižek as a type of passivity. Barros allows his cinematic double to act as his fetish. In this way, Barros can reconcile his conscience through his fictional / confessional act but not change the reality of the situation.

A counterpoint to the experience of life through mass culture is that of the protagonists who see themselves as writers, although the separation between literature and mass culture is not necessarily that great. The chapter “Una vida modelo” in Por favor, rebobinar is told by Andoni Llovet, a model with literary aspirations. This protagonist makes evident the ways in which literary or high culture and mass culture intersect, but also the ways in which they are consumed and perceived. The narrator reflects on the accessibility of culture, and differentiates between an elitist world, that of literature, and a more democratic community of consumers of mass culture:

Me queda claro que en el ambiente literario, en el mundo de ustedes, no soy muy conocido. Aún. Algún día, no me cabe la menor duda, lo seré. Pero todavía no
Thus, as Karin Hopfe comments, Llovet combines the private sphere of narration with the public sphere of mass culture (120). He recognizes both the power and the artifice of mass culture, at the same time elaborating a differentiation between the two. Llovet confesses that, “es hora de contar . . . todo lo que tiene que ver conmigo, con mi imagen pública y con la privada también, aunque muchos escépticos por ahí creen que no existe, que nunca la he tenido, que sólo soy—que sólo fui—lo que se veía en la pantalla, chica o grande, da lo mismo” (127). For many, mass cultural fiction and reality are one in the same.

As Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat argues, “hay que reparar en cómo la invención literaria dentro de la novela, es decir, la de los personajes que escriben literatura, se orienta casi automáticamente hacia la expresión visual o cibernética” (20). As members of a postmodern age, the technological advances of the Internet and of mass culture in general are extremely important in the narratives of the literary circle. A member of Llovet’s literary workshop, Danae Solís is described as, “una tipa muy alta y espigada, de pelo corto-negro azulado, que rápidamente fue apodada ‘la new-wave’ debido a que siempre escribía sobre fiestas underground y artistas plásticos y sexo compartido y llenaba sus texts de citas pop y frases de películas que nunca nadie había visto” (151), highlighting the confluence of literature and mass culture.

Another literary workshop member, and friend of Llovet, Ignacia Urre dedicates herself to writing about popular culture in her journalism. Her article, “Totalmente
confusos,” describes the iconic club Juancho’s and serves as an introduction to the protagonist Pascal Barros. It is a text that is highly personal, a narration which dedicates a majority of the text, not to Barros, but to the mosh pit and an encounter with rock groupie Reyes talking about sex, drugs and, of course, rock and roll. Even the great Néstor Quijano, who takes the role of mentor in charge of the literary workshop, is the author of “ese pituto televisivo que se transformó en fenómeno de rating llamado Cuarto ‘C’” (140).

Llovet is joined in the workshop by Baltazar Daza, the “intellectual” writer, who constantly criticizes his peers’ writing. Daza recognizes a society that is becoming increasingly more homogenous. In describing his evolving novel, Daza states, “[y]a no está centrado en mi alter-ego. No es sólo una historia sino varias, todas paralelas. Vidas paralelas. . . La gente, como los libros, cambian, huevón. Este es el caso típico, supongo. Es una saga esquizofrénica. La tesis es que todos los de nuestra generación somos básicamente iguales. Todos venimos de Plaza Sésamo” (213). The generation that Daza describes is one that contains individuals, but their individuality to some extent masks a homogenous experience that is based in part on the experience of growing up in a common mass cultural context. Interestingly enough, for him this connection also has more to do with the mass cultural experience than it does with the Pinochet regime, once again demonstrating a de-politicization of the narrative.

Instead of focusing on a political narrative, Daza chooses to center his production in the culture industry itself. His first novel, Famoso is a biographical novel that combines elements of his friends Llovet and Barros, both of whom are very public figures. The master work he is writing is called Disco Duro and pretends to be a “una
saga, pero sin caer en la fórmula del realismo mágico. Puro realismo virtual, pura literatura McCondo. Algo así como *La casa de los espíritus* sin los espíritus” (145). It is perhaps through the act of narration that one could find the possibility of resistance through mass culture. This quote highlights the ambition of Fuguet to reject the facile appropriation of the techniques that made the Boom successful. In the McOndo introduction as well as in his own literary production, Fuguet advocates an aesthetic that is based on a globalized culture which focuses largely on the products of the culture industry.

Fuguet’s novels describe a situation in which North American mass culture is used as a type of passive domination through which the characters maintain the status quo by focusing on the external rather than the internal. Even when the protagonists take a more active role regarding mass culture, becoming producers rather than consumers, mass culture is still used as a fetish which allows them to continue in the same situation rather than work as a form of resistance to an established authority.

The connections between Rodrigo Fresán and Fuguet are not hard to find. Fresán was a contributor to the anthology *McOndo*, and in many ways shares the preoccupations that Fuguet expresses regarding a new Latin American aesthetic that rejects the appropriation of the Boom and magical realism. In his narrative, Fresán explores the power structures involved with the culture industry in a postmodern context, but also includes a strong generational discourse that juxtaposes an idealized, simplistic past with a degraded postmodern future. In his novels *Esperanto* (1997) and *Mantra* (2001), Fresán confronts this shifting landscape, trying to come to terms with the individual’s space and
his / her relationship to mass culture in a way that reflects the Twilight Zone (un)reality of a postmodern world saturated with mass culture.

The novel Esperanto, follows the life of Federico Esperanto, aging composer of advertising jingles and former rock star and Oscar nominee, who continually complains that “nadie me entiende” (17). This lack of understanding can be seen as a part of the generational gap that Esperanto feels between his own generation and one that grew up fully immersed in the postmodern age of the video clip and the acceleration of information. Esperanto claims that with the advances in technology which allow shuffle and repeat functions, “no hay pausa para reflexionar acerca de lo que fue y acerca de lo que vendrá. Ahora todo se reedita con tomas descartadas y bonus-tracks que debilitan la idea de algo sólido, armónico y coherente” (63). What Esperanto sees in the postmodern landscape of shifting interpretation is a lack of reflection and cohesion that is promoted by the forms of mass culture and its connection to the consumer culture. One could also argue that Esperanto suffers from future shock, the psychological result of too much change in too short a time period.17 This idea is further emphasized by a passage in which Esperanto describes the scene on the television screen as a chaotic and constantly moving shift of focus:

porque lo que aquí importaba era agotar las posibilidades sin descartar ninguna.

This constant movement and impermanence causes Esperanto to wonder at the ability of the future generation to even form a complete logical sentence in the correct order. The fragmentation of mass culture for Esperanto is connected with a breakdown of cognitive faculties which eventually leads to a vapid existence bereft of meaning other than that put there by mass culture, as is the case with his half brother Dani/Tony. The decay of the individual’s ability to actively interact with their world leaves the receptor open for the culture industry to make decisions on his / her behalf.

This vision of the postmodern culture industry is contrasted with a nostalgia for a now unattainable quality from the past. On the night of the Oscars, Esperanto talks with octogenarian film director, Lyndon Bells, who has just won a lifetime achievement Oscar “por la sencilla razón de que nunca nadie se había tomado el trabajo de dárselo cuando correspondía” (130). Bells complains of a Hollywood in which special effects have taken the place of solid storytelling. He states that, just like the statue given for the Academy Award, “[y]a no hay huevos ni cerebros en esta ciudad. Hollywood se ha convertido en un gigantesco efecto especial donde las historias no importan” (130).

Describing his half brother, Esperanto explains this generational gap through the metaphor of mass culture. He tells Dani/Tony that, “vos tuviste la mala suerte … de crecer con la televisión en colores. Cuando yo era joven, la televisión era en blanco y negro y no costaba demasiado pensar que todo no podía pasar por ahí. Porque era una tosca imitación de la realidad” (62), and later that, “[v]os sos de la era del CD y yo soy de la era del LP. Vinilo. En mi tiempo todo tenía un LADO A y un LADO B. Como el Yin
y el Yang” (62). As a part of his inability to communicate, Esperanto laments a world which has lost its sense of order, its side A and side B, its Yin and its Yang. He laments a time in which the clear separation between lived reality and television experience still existed, in which the artifice of mass culture was palpable. Sylvia Kurlat-Ares understands this disillusionment as a part of the new market sensibilities involved in the culture industry. She explains that, “Esperanto tiene una visión crítica de esta situación. Las canciones de música de rock que en su infancia habían sido ‘himnos de batalla’ de la rebelión y la renovación cultural, quedaban reducidas, por la fuerza de la lógica del mercado, a música de fondo para comerciales televisivos” (224). What Kurlat-Ares sees in the novel is the increasingly explicit connection between mass culture and consumerism.

The connection in Esperanto’s life to the consumer culture is further emphasized by his job as a writer of jingles for a advertising company. It is possible to see his slogan, “Nadie me entiende” in another light given his position as facilitator of this consumer culture. One could argue that Esperanto does not let himself be understood as an observer, but not a part of this culture. He maintains an elitist posture regarding the masses for whom he composes jingles. His partner, Montaña García, claims that the audience for their jingles are CACA (Anarchic and Compulsive Argentine Consumer). Montaña García continues this derogatory designation, adding that these consumers are, “la clase de bestia que sólo imagina a Shangri-La o a Xanadú como enormes e inabarcables shopping centers. Adictos irrecuperables a las bolsas y a los paquetes y al plástico de las tarjetas de crédito que suplantan así las leyes del tiempo y del espacio” (80). The consumer culture for which Esperanto composes his jingles is also one in
which certain experiences and places have become universal. He reflects on what Marc Augé designates non places, arguing that, “[l]as discotecas –al igual que los aeropuertos, los shopping-centers, los hospitales y, sí, los novedosos 24 Horas- son sitios similares en su núcleo básico más allá de su estética y hasta de su diferente situación geográfica” (155). Above all, the homogenization of culture combined with a generation that is completely engaged with television and mass culture creates a reality for Esperanto in which thought and reflection do not happen. The culture industry and homogenous structures of life provide an environment in which every action and reaction is scripted.

The question then becomes, how does Esperanto find a way to make sense of the reality in which he lives that is so different from his own world view? His way of coming to terms with an environment in which critical thought is downplayed, that is, an environment in which he sees himself as an outsider, is to posit that it is a part of the Twilight Zone. The end of the novel narrates that “Esperanto estaba más que seguro- iba a comenzar a oírse el inconfundible motivo musical compuesto por Marius Constant para los títulos de la serie Dimensión desconocida” (205). His reality has become the (un)reality of the Twilight Zone in which anything can occur and have a more or less logical explanation within the so-called fifth dimension. Esperanto’s escape through the Twilight Zone runs so deep that he even imagines an introduction in which Rod Serling explains his unique episode: that of a man trapped by memories, who tries to run away from everything and everyone. Esperanto uses the Twilight Zone as a defense mechanism by which he can still see the possibility of salvation for a world which has lost its ability to think clearly due to the influence of mass culture; it is not the real world,
but rather a “zona donde lo imaginado no vacila en fundirse con lo real. Un área a la que llamamos … la Dimensión desconocida” (206).

Fresán’s subsequent novel, Mantra (2001) is a complex and lengthy work that does and says many different things. Any attempt to describe Mantra confronts its complex and interwoven narratives and experimental techniques. J. Andrew Brown argues that, “we see a series of attempts to understand culture, both Mexican and global, as the conglomeration of popular discourses and especially television and film” (147). In very reduced terms, the novel presents the interactions of three different narrators with Martín Mantra, as well as a journey through the history of Mexico City.

The novel begins with the reflections of comic book artist, Letra X, in connection with meeting Martín Mantra at school in what he calls his now non-existent country. This narration is complicated by the presence of a brain tumor (his “Sea Monkey”) which leads to a continuous loss of memory. As occurs in Esperanto, this section contains a generational discourse that looks at the cultural differences and attitudes between an older and a younger generation. The narrator first criticizes his parents, revolutionary hippies who failed to fully embrace their ideals. The narrator demonstrates his disdain for his parents and what they symbolize in stating that he keeps a picture of his school, but does not have a picture of them (29). As artifacts that facilitate memory (especially given that the narrator is struggling with memory), the absence of his parents is telling. Letra X describes his parents thus, “[m]is padres pertenecían a un comando guerrillero-intelectual, un desprendimiento ilustrado, muy poco lo-sé-todo y un tanto amateur de un movimiento paradójicamente católico y marxista, que había decidido por unanimidad bautizar como Comando General Cabrera” (50). These revolutionaries seem to live
double lives. Spending little time at home, the guerrillas “se la pasaban bombardeando supermercados capitalistas,” (50). At the same time they live in the capitalist system at home, “redactando curiosos manifiestos en casas de fin de semana con piscina y asado para todos” (50).

Despite their revolutionary activities, Tamara and Can-Can, the narrator’s parents, engage in a very typical middle class lifestyle. They have a servant, who introduces the narrator to Mexican culture, and the narrator remembers a trip to Disneyland. Letra X’s parents also went through continual rounds of separation. Regarding these separations, Martín Mantra states that, “[l]a idea de ‘separarse’ para, de ser posible ‘juntarse’ con miembros de las otras parejas disolutas, era . . . proveniente de una cultura donde la palabra divorcio era sinónimo de la palabra lepra” (52). Thus, the “firm” bonds of sacred matrimony which the parents inherit from their Catholic tradition are mutable boundaries that permit their various indiscretions, all within the purview of their marriage. They cannot completely give up the structures of society and live a truly free, liberal life.

In addition to the understood paradox that allows them to be Marxist revolutionaries yet live an affluent middle class lifestyle, the narrator’s parents are also contradictory in baptizing their children. The text states that,

Yo había sido bautizado como católico, es cierto, pero mis padres –como casi todos los padres de su generación y pertenecientes a la intelligentsia- habían roto con la religión de sus padres causando un cisma religioso que había dado como resultado toda una generación de hijos cuyas cabezas de bebés habían sido humedecidas con agua bendita –por las dudas y para contentar a los abuelos- para después crecer en una especie de ateísmo un tanto blasfemo. (85)
They feel the need to baptize, as Catholics and in order to maintain a generational truce with their parents, yet the baptism is a false one since the children live in a household of irreverence and blasphemy. For the narrator, his parents symbolize two things: hypocrisy and control.

The element of control for the narrator is tied to the issue of memory. He states that, “la crónica de nuestras infancias las escriben, en realidad, nuestros padres empeñados en conseguir y capturar a través de ellas un reflejo cada vez más distante de sus cada vez más distantes pasados” (134). As occurs in the household, where the children are baptized but indoctrinated as atheists, parents play a large role in orquestrating the process of memory about one’s infancy.

It is a control that to some degree can be paired with mass culture in this section, although the narrator also affirms the possibility of mass culture to reject the very same domination that he describes. The narrator’s childhood offers one more very real example of the power of mass culture within the convoluted middle class context of his family. He explains that his introduction to Mexican culture comes from various artifacts of popular culture, movies, telenovelas, comics and others. Part of this is through the medium of his former domestic servant, Violeta, who convinces herself that she is in fact his own mother. The novels observes that, “[e]sta conducta un tanto demencial había sido consecuencia directa de una sobreexposición a la telenovela, sí, mexicana llamada La Escorpión (una de esas telenovelas mexicanas donde las sirvientas mexicanas son siempre las madres mexicanas de los niños ricos y mexicanos)” (38). The text goes on to recount that Violeta kidnaps the narrator with the help of her boyfriend. Thus, mass
culture has the potential to completely dominate one’s life, overshadowing logical behavior.

The power of mass culture is not always so strong, however. The purpose of the first part of the novel is to explain the importance of Martín Mantra for the protagonist, and to offer Mantra as an alternative to the rigid authoritarianism of his parents. The experience of Martín Mantra is summed up from their first encounter, where the narrator leaves the security of rules and authority to play Russian roulette with the recently arrived Martín. As the grandson of Mexican media mogul, Máximo Mantra, Martín is specially positioned to bring a reflection about the mass media to the narrator’s discourse. Martín sees a future where mass culture will saturate peoples’ lives through the technology of a camera inserted into one’s eye. This MoviEye gives mass culture the ability to even replace memory. The narrator states that, “[y]a no recordaremos nuestro pasado como si fuera una película, porque nuestro pasado será una película de la que seremos primeros protagonistas, para poder ser espectadores después” (67). In essence, Martín proposes that every individual will become the film director of his/her own life. Mass culture ceases to be mere entertainment and becomes an indispensable part of daily life. In a parallel to the discourse found in Fuguet’s Por favor, rebobinar, the participation in this life / film can be either active or passive.

The narrator himself theorizes the importance of technological changes (through the image of toys), when he contrasts the experience of a younger generation with his own. He explains, “nuestros juguetes eran los juguetes de una generación que jugaba poco (lo justo), veía muy poca televisión (tal vez porque era en blanco y negro . . . ), leía muchos libros, escuchaba bastante música, e iba mucho al cine a ver una y otra vez las
mismas películas-fetiche” (65). The narrator comes from a generation that is exposed to mass culture, but which is much more attuned to older forms of culture like books, music and film. The rapid advances in technology are recognized, however, in the progression of toys from the age of iron (steel cars and lead soldiers) to the age of electricity (battery powered robots) (62).

Letra X further states that, “[l]a idea de que nuestros hijos fueran a disponer de computadoras domésticas o padecer brotes psicóticos por la adicción a realidades virtuales, ni siquiera entraba dentro de los amplios límites de nuestras imaginaciones más preparadas para asimilar la idea del futuro a partir de lecturas pretéritas” (63). Despite the rapid change in technology which the narrator experiences, he still feels a distinct generational difference not only between his generation and that of his parents (as hypocritical and controlling hippies), but also between his own and that of the younger generation. The narrator decides to couch this difference in terms of mass culture; his is a generation that engaged with mass culture, but in a limited way. The future generation, however, is one in which the technological advances become a very integral part of their experience and in which this experience in some cases is supplanted by that of a virtual reality.

This is certainly not an attitude that is limited to the first part of the novel. In the second part of the novel, the narration is continued by a French narrator who is leaving Mexico City in a coffin and speaks from the world of the dead. This narrator is connected to the overall narration through his relationship with Marfa-Marie, one of the Mantra clan. He also forms a part of the same generation to which Letra X pertains. The French narrator describes his generation as one for which,
El curso de nuestras biografías estuvo trazado de antemano y nuestras mínimas transgresiones a ese mapa siempre fueron nada más que formas alternativas de acatamiento: drogas del tipo recreacional, alcohol, matrimonios mal avenidos, poco originales y siempre incompletas tentativas de suicidio, la adicción eléctrica a los videogames más fáciles de vencer, ver demasiadas veces la misma película de culto hasta sentirla parte de la respiración. No éramos viejos pero tampoco éramos jóvenes, y la palabra *madurez* era consultada cada vez más veces en el diccionario de nuestros días con la angustiante incredulidad de quien no puede creer que aquello que lee lo incluya o lo defina. (414-415)

As opposed to Letra X, the French narrator describes a generation that attempts to find itself through the rebellion of drugs and the mindless abandon in videogames and film. It is a generation that is also reflected in Fuguet’s *Por favor, rebobinar*, one which avoids growing up, and part of this extended childhood is found in the use of mass culture. The fetish of mass culture allows the “adult” to maintain the status quo of “adolescent.”

In the face of the changes occurring, and the authoritarian control of both parents and the potential for mass cultural domination, Letra X decides to reject the act of conforming. At the end of the first section of *Mantra*, the narrator exclaims,

> Actores perdidos en la película de nuestras vidas, a la espera de que alguien llegue a nuestros estudios y nos dirija con amor, inteligencia, buen gusto e insuperable sentido del ritmo. Yo me resisto a esto. Yo dirijo mi propia película, amigo …

> En la sala de lecturas del infierno, en el club de los aficionados a la ciencia-ficción, en el programa de televisión de la muerte, somos seres humanos, casi pájaros. Héroes públicos y secretos. Yo no soy marinero, soy capitán. (135)
Rather than take a passive stance and let society plot his course (i.e. be the director of his life movie), the narrator decides to take control of his own film and direct it himself.\(^{23}\) It is this decision that compels the narrator to cut ties with his past, and even his present in order to fly to Mexico City to lose himself in a new identity.

The second part of the novel allows for a deeper exploration of the confluence of mass culture and the individual in terms of (remote) control and influence. Told through the posthumous commentary of the French narrator, the second part of the novel is an alphabetical listing of entries that range from the History of Mexico to the history of the Mantra family and other topics in between.

Given the importance of Máximo Mantra, head of the media giant, MantraVisión, this section gives an inside look at the culture industry and the position the novel takes regarding mass culture in general. Máximo Mantra explains that the function of mass culture is to entertain and possibly to educate as well. In a statement reminiscent of Adorno and Horkheimer, Máximo adds that, “México es un país de una clase muy jodida. Para la televisión entonces es una obligación y un deber sagrado llevar diversión a la gentuza y sacarla de su triste presente y, seamos sinceros, de su futuro mucho más triste todavía” (363).\(^{24}\) Máximo sees his production company as a medium for the pacification of the masses, and further details that his idea of control is also intimately tied to social class. He explains that, “nuestro mercado está muy claro: la clase baja y la clase media. La clase alta puede leer libros si tiene ganas o comprar esas revistas de denuncia de la competencia” (363). MantraVisión is created principally as a way of maintaining power over the masses that its programs will enable individuals to live their desperate lower and middle class lives.
As a way of exploring the production of the culture industry, which seeks to dominate the masses, the novel includes a long discourse about telenovelas. The text explains that, “[l]as telenovelas de cada país son un fiel reflejo –aunque bizarro, sublimado, en ocasiones paródico- de su historia patria y de su ser nacional o como quieran llamarlo” (463). The narrator then goes one step further, to propose that, “[l]as telenovelas mexicanas (con sus luchas de clases, sus muertes y resurrecciones, sus fantasmas del pasado y profecías futuristas y apocalípticas, con sus vueltas sobre vueltas y sus fluctuaciones temporales) acabarán sustituyendo a la historia” (464). For Fresán, the telenovela (and mass culture for that matter) explain national identity and character to such an extent that eventually it comes to replace historical identity. In defining cultural identity, mass culture takes the role of authoritarian presence that dictates “truth” to the individual through the guise of entertainment.

The French narrator also connects telenovela with history and mythology in recognizing the basic formulaic or scripted nature of the mass cultural product. At various times, the narrator refers to pre-Columbian mythology as a telenovela. For instance, the narrator explains that, “Huitzilopochtli baila y une los pedazos de su hermana Coyolxauhqui, la madre Coatlicue resucita. Telenovelas divinas” (241). Within the novel, the telenovela, with its stock characters and motifs: the amnesiac, the suffering mother, the servant raised to the status of power and influence, continues the mythical tradition and flirts with the border between “reality” and “fiction.”

The metaphor of the telenovela is a powerful way of understanding the (un)reality of one’s own life. The narrator further complicates the separation between mass culture fiction and reality by theorizing that, “[s]i hay algo mejor a que una película imite la vida,
ese algo es que, después, no importa el tiempo que se tome, la vida imite a una película en el instante preciso en que vida y película se encuentran y se dan la mano y las pupilas” (280). Life and mass culture, for the narrator, are not completely separate categories, but rather are fusions that both entail a certain amount of “truth” and a certain amount of “fiction.” This is expressed through the portrayal of the news in the novel, showing Boris Karloff experiencing the massacre at Tlateloloco as a film and later describing the bombing of Warsaw thus: “[l]legamos a mi hotel mientras al otro lado del mundo caen misiles y se levantan llamas como en *Apocalypse Now.* Nos despedimos con el afecto de quienes han vivido mucho en pocos minutos; ese sentimiento que tan bien les sale a los grandes escritores. Subo al cuarto. CNN. La misma historia, en el mismo idioma, pero contada de otra manera” (463). Reality is indistinguishable from mass culture; what matters is the perspective that one has regarding the events. It is this approximation of mass culture to life, and the desire of the consumer for a product that demonstrates “reality” that leads Martín Mantra to propose a forerunner to the reality shows of today, the total film Mundo Mantra. This show would chronicle the everyday life and drama of the Mantra family. Rather than “un ojo que transforma un microcosmos, el de la casa de los Mantra, a un macrososmos, imagen de México-Ciudad, imagen de México-París, imagen, por fin, del mundo” (97), as José García-Romeu would propose which takes the familial “reality” of the Mantras and converts it to a universal experience, Mundo Mantra gives Martín Mantra the tool to enable the creation of a new reality. The approximation of Mundo Mantra to “reality” gives it the legitimacy needed to transform it.

In this act of recording and disseminating, Martín sees a very powerful possibility to utilize the dominating function of mass culture for his own purposes. The French
narrator states that, “Martín Mantra sabía que en la filmación de una película total residía la posibilidad de crear una nueva familia de dioses” (400). This attitude proves to be the driving force behind Martín Mantra turned revolutionary, Capitán Godzilla. Basing his revolutionary credo on mass culture, Capitán Godzilla proclaims a science fiction agenda, “[m]exicanos: un país sin ciencia-ficción es un país sin futuro... Dejemos atrás las supersticiones vampíricas del pasado y abracemos de lleno una nueva vocación androide... Mexicanos, todos juntos ahora: ¡Cada uno a su robot!” (220), which allows for the repositioning of his familial mythology as an instrument of domination and power.

The control of the culture industry, however, encompasses the “actors” involved in the series Mundo Mantra. María-Marie, the Mantra with amnesia, comments that “[a] ver si lo entiendes de una buena vez por todas: mi familia mexicana fue abducida por una telenovela mexicana. No hay retorno posible de allí” (501). It is a control that starts before Mundo Mantra, however, with Martín’s telenovela parents. His mother, the beautiful Lupita Delmar becomes so immersed in the reality of her own telenovela existence, that she becomes incapable of communicating outside of the patterns of mass culture. Martín’s life is also dictated by the constraints of the telenovela from the beginning, as his birth becomes a part of the telenovela in which his mother is starring, and the great events of the Mantra family are presented through the mass cultural metaphor of the videogame: “[b]autismos, primeras comuniones y bodas y funerales: los cuatro inevitables stages de su videogame familiar” (276).

Martín’s reaction to his lack of control is to look towards science fiction and the advocacy provided by directing films (rather than acting) to regain control of his own
life. In essence, Martín becomes a part of the dominating culture industry as a way of escaping the domination that it imposes on him.

The French narrator, in contrast, takes a much more passive stance regarding his life and regarding mass culture. Through the metaphor of the remote control, the narrator explains his own acceptance of the status quo, stating “no te dan un control remoto con estos televisores. No te dan el derecho a cambiar canales porque, después de todo, si no tuviste el más remoto control de tu vida, qué te hace pensar que puedas llegar a tener el control remoto de tu muerte” (503-504). The narrator experiences his death as a series of images and events outside of his control. By insisting on a lack of advocacy in his own life, the narrator gives in to the processes of domination freely, merely acknowledging his state of helplessness. It is a stance that Máximo Mantra recognizes when he states that the function of his telenovelas is to divert, with its double definition of giving pleasure and turning aside from a given course. It is also a stance that Martín Mantra recognizes in carefully constructing his new religion based on the media culture.

In the end, the dominating function of mass culture as producer of new mythologies is validated. The final section of the novel takes place in a post-apocalyptic world brought about by the terrorist activities of Capitán Godzilla (aka Martín Mantra). This section follows the journey of the narrator, a cyborg created by Martín, in search of its origins. In the post-apocalyptic world created by Capitán Godzilla, a new mythology based on mass culture takes hold. The robotic narrator wanders a world that has transformed earlier referents from mass culture to situate them within a post-apocalyptic cosmovision. Thus, MTV becomes Kill Torture Violate and the first being the narrator comes across talks of American Hit Parade as “flashes de otra vida” (517). In his
search to find his father, Mantrax / Martín Mantra / Capitán Godzilla, the narrator comes across the codex that forms the basis of the apocalyptic mythology, the total film Mundo Mantra. In this mass culture form, the novel reverses the theory of Walter Benjamin in which the technological reproducibility of the work of art destroys the cult value of the work. In the case presented in Mantra, the reproducibility of the work of art, its technological factor, is precisely what gives it mythological power. The narrator describes the codex / film as “nuestro texto sagrado, nuestra religión en movimiento, y allí se contaba la historia formidable y sin pausas de los Mantrax, la raza de los elegidos, la familia de dioses que vivían adentro de cajas de electricidad de las que, en ocasiones salían” (523). In the post-apocalyptic (science fiction) age that is populated with robots and cyborgs, the mass cultural images become the basis of a new religion in the same way that the text suggests the pre-Colombian “telenovela” mythology (that is, the popular culture of the time) was the basis for that age’s mythologies.

The Codex gives one more indication of its purpose and form. After describing the fateful “Noche Triste de los Mantra,” in which the majority of the family dies in a fire at the familial home, Cielito Lindo, the Codex explains that they died in order to become gods and that Mantrax placed them in his Mundo Mantra. This passage ends with the words of Martín, stating,

> Se me perdonará este final dramáticamente apocalíptico, pero es tan inevitable como necesario. Así como los dioses murieron para que nazcan los hombres, ahora los hombres deben morir para que nazcan los dioses. Es el único modo de acabar con todo esto para que todo lo demás empiece y nos traslademos en un viaje sin escalas a la Dimensión Desconocida. (525)
As occurs in Esperanto, Fresán uses the imagery of the Twilight Zone to frame his discourse in Mantra. The Twilight Zone is seen as a gateway to a new way of life and is heavily tied to the idea of the life film. Martín states early in the novel that, “[l]a importancia histórica de Rod Serling –al principio y al final de cada uno de los episodios de Dimensión desconocida- residía . . . en que todos buscamos a alguien hábilmente rodserlingforme que nos narre y ordene nuestras existencias” (58). The Twilight Zone character of Rod Serling functions as a guiding force for the consumer which explains his / her existence to oneself, once again highlighting the passive attitude taken by the consumer. It is the principle of mass culture as a guiding force that explains the presence of Rod Serling at the beginning and the end of the second section with the comments of the French narrator that “[l]o que ocurre, lo que ocurrió –al menos en mi caso- es algo muy diferente: en el momento del final del principio y del principio del final aparece Rod Serling . . . te informa que a partir de ahora ciertos segmentos de tu biografía serán vueltos a compaginar. En orden alfabético” (164-165). The Twilight Zone maintains its controlling function, but takes on mystical, religious overtones in the last section of the novel. Here the Twilight Zone becomes the object of a mystical quest, an image of a perfect life.

Looking at Esperanto and Mantra together, mass culture for Fresán is portrayed as an instrument of domination in that it invites a passive consumer. Fresán examines a largely depoliticized generation that grew up with television and film and sees these media as part of the problem that contributes to a passive, apathetic citizen. In Mantra, the active stance of Martín Mantra / Capitán Godzilla is a revolution based more on a mass cultural aesthetic than any political or social stance. Capitán Godzilla is not
fighting to save democracy and capitalism or to help the disenfranchised bring about a more equitable society, but is fighting to bring science fiction to Mexico and to facilitate his own immortality through the creation of mythology in the form of a reality show. The postmodern age in which Fresán’s protagonists live as outsiders can only be comprehended by projecting the (un)reality of the Twilight Zone onto it, working as a fetish to allow the status quo of a chaotic postmodern reality to continue.

In utilizing mass culture as a fetish which allows the continuation of the status quo, both Fuguet and Fresán are continuing the conversation regarding mass culture that starts with the Onda and with Puig. In a postmodern context, Fuguet and Fresán describe the ways that mass culture and the consumer’s reaction to mass culture have changed, but they are still within the framework of resistance and domination that Horkheimer, Adorno and Benjamin outline. Fuguet and Fresán are not expressing a situation in which mass culture is just beginning to demonstrate its importance, as an instrument of control through the government nor as a way to resist this governmental intrusion into identity like the Onda authors do. Fuguet utilizes mass culture as a way of explaining his generational identity, but the resistance to Chilean identity that comes out in his narration is more of a reaction than an active resistance. Neither Fuguet nor Fresán expresses the possibility of mass culture to resist the expression of a subaltern identity through the careful and active participation with mass culture as we see in Manuel Puig’s texts. While there are certainly discourses within Fuguet’s and Fresán’s narrative that show a sense of alienation or lack of belonging, this sense of loss or marginality, if anything, is heightened by the presence of mass culture. In a postmodern context where the issues of cultural imperialism have largely been supplanted by the ideology of globalization and
preoccupations with the unheard voices that are part of a postmodern ideology, what Fuguet and Fresán contribute to the conversation about mass culture is to argue that in a world of destabilizing identities and structures of power, the culture industry maintains its power over the consumers through direct intervention or through the false, fetishistic perception of being an active participant.

This project began with recognition of the importance of mass culture for the works of the McOndo generation of authors like Fuguet and Fresán. The impetus for my investigation of Fuguet and Fresán, as well as the Onda authors and Puig has always been to find answers to a number of questions. How do these authors and works fit into the broader discourse of mass culture in Latin America (both historically as well as literarily)? What connections are there between the different groups of authors? How does temporal distance affect the perception of mass culture in these narratives? Finally, how do we make sense of mass culture as a common discursive thread in Latin American narrative?

At the end of this process, we can draw some conclusions regarding the presence of mass culture. Fuguet and Fresán clearly inherit much from previous authors. Like the Onda writers, Fuguet and Fresán are preoccupied with a specifically middle to upper class demographic that sees mass culture as a forum for exploring the idea of autonomous national identity. The characters in Fuguet’s *Mala onda* and *Por favor, rebobinar* are reminiscent of the youth that occupy the pages of Agustín’s *La tumba*, García Saldaña’s *Pasto verde*, Manjarrez’s *Lapsus*, and Sainz’s *Gazapo*. All of these novels reflect a youth culture that incorporates mass culture as a part of their generational identity. They focus on the fusion of cultures that come from consuming foreign, largely North American
mass culture in a very national context. These narratives recognize that mass culture from outside the confines of national production is of necessity a real and valid part of the cultural baggage that Latin American citizens carry.

Where Fuguet and Fresán deviate from the discourse of mass culture found in the Onda authors is the direct affirmation or rejection of cultural imperialism as it is expressed by Latin American theorists Antonio Pasquali, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart. The essays by Monsiváis and Manjarrez’s short story, “Johnny,” see the increasing presence of North American mass culture as a threat to Mexican national identity. Monsiváis calls the stage of mass culture after the creation of television stations a cultural Northamericanization in which, “Batman y Robin sustituyen a Hidalgo y Morelos” (“Cultura popular” 118), and Manjarrez gives a very direct metaphor of North American television culture literally invading the Mexican home in “Johnny.” In contrast, García Saldaña believes North American mass culture to enable resistance to the enshrined vision of Mexican identity that the ruling PRI party promotes through national mass culture. Agustín and Saínz utilize mass culture in their narratives in much the same way, as an identifying characteristic of Mexican youth, which in turn differentiates this generation from the official discourse of the day.

While Fuguet and Fresán continue a generational discourse, in which mass culture is tied to youth identity, the concept of cultural imperialism disappears. Rather than focus on how foreign mass culture has affected or supplanted national culture, these authors reflect the situation that Néstor García Canclini describes in which “postmodern identities are transterritorial and multilinguistic. They are structured less by the logic of the state than by that of markets” (Consumers 29). In Fuguet’s novel Mala onda, the only
worthwhile culture is North American, while Chilean culture is described as substandard. Fresán in Esperanto sees all mass culture, both Argentine and North American, as contributing to the decay of the individual’s cognitive ability which is also connected to postmodernism. Like Fredric Jameson and Beatriz Sarlo, Fresán describes culture (both traditional high culture as well as mass culture) as completely subsumed to market forces, decrying a previous “golden age” of mass culture in which aesthetics had its place. Mass culture for Fresán and Fuguet helps describe a new generation of youth. Instead of the youth culture which sees society in a state of crisis which seeks to combat the Establishment consistent with the youth identity in the Onda authors, Fresán and Fuguet identify a generation in crisis itself. For Fuguet, this crisis is part of extended adolescence and the marginal position of Chile regarding the fully developed world while for Fresán, the crisis comes in the form of the masses which are no longer able to function effectively, a situation which is not caused by the current state of information technologies, but which is exacerbated by them.

If Fresán argues that mass culture in a postmodern era inhibits thought, Manuel Puig counters that the key to defying a system of domination lies in the nature of interaction with mass cultural texts. In Boquitas pintadas, Puig favors a Benjaminian argument in which technological advances allow the masses to become critically engaged for the first time.\textsuperscript{31} Those protagonists who actively engage with interpretation and become active agents in their own lives are rewarded in the end. The Buenos Aires Affair continues the discourse of critical engagement for the individual found in Boquitas pintadas, but also tackles the tension between the value placed on high and mass culture through the character development of Leo and Gladys. Ultimately, Puig proposes that the
type of culture (that is, the intended audience) matters less than the individual’s reaction to culture. In essence, Puig provides a guidebook for how to interact with culture, at the same time giving value to less prestigious forms of culture. Puig’s didactic use of mass culture also indirectly dialogues with the preoccupation with cultural imperialism that the Onda authors express. Cultural imperialism implies domination in which the consumer is largely unaware of the imposition of foreign ideology through mass culture. By advocating for an active and critical consumer, Puig allows for an individual who, like the subjects in Ien Ang’s study, are aware of the ideological implications of the texts they consume.32

In looking at all of these texts and authors together, the discourse of mass culture as a threat or form of domination which is indebted to the theories of Horkheimer, Adorno, Pasquali, Dorfman, Mattelart and Jameson finds a narrative parallel in the works of Onda authors Manjarrez and Monsivais and twenty first century novelist Fresán. At the same time, the long tradition of advocacy for the masses through the resisting function of mass culture (as seen in the theorists Benjamin, Baudrillard and García Canclini) also carries forth in the narratives of Agustín, Sainz, García Saldaña and Manuel Puig. Mass culture seen broadly as either domination or resistance clearly carries past time period and geographical context.

The ways in which the domination or resistance argument develops in each of these groups helps examine their specific contexts. The Onda authors, for instance, are products of a moment when Mexico underwent the conjoint processes of national identity building and the destabilizing counterculture that questioned the metanarratives of monolithic national identity and of authority (the Establishment). Their texts necessarily
explore the importance of cultural imperialism and the priority given by the PRI dominated government towards certain cultural icons over others as a way of commenting on national identity. The Onda authors, whether they accept or reject the idea of cultural imperialism, recognize that foreign cultural goods contribute significantly to certain (largely middle to upper class) youth experiences in Mexico at the time.

Manuel Puig speaks from the same spirit of uncertainty regarding identities, but from a very different context. A situation where cultural products intended for an elite audience of individuals who can properly consume them and in which certain minority populations (like women or homosexuals) are also considered less valuable or capable (both in general or intellectually) provides the background for Puig’s reflections on mass culture. His novels speak to the agency that critical engagement can provide both for the devalued mass cultural text as well as for the individual.

Lastly, the context from which Fuguet and Fresán express themselves is one for which the questions of cultural imperialism and, arguably, the masses and mass culture as a less worthy object have largely disappeared. Fuguet and Fresán’s cultural and intellectual context reflects the shift in Latin America away from protectionist economic policies towards free market economies as well as a sense of ennui that comes from the postmodern destabilization of metanarratives. This combines with advances in technology to account for the protagonists who either have no direction or who long for an unattainable “golden age” that resides in the past. Mass culture enters in the form of a fetish to allow the protagonists to cope with the changes they face.

The debate as to whether mass culture functions in society as a force of domination or as a mode of resistance will certainly endure. As technology advances at
an increasingly rapid pace, what remains to be seen is the way in which the argument is framed and how it can show us something of the context from which it arises.

1 While Sarlo confronts culture in general and mass culture specifically in her criticism of postmodern life, there are other effects that carry equal weight for her, like the decline in the quality of education. In the introduction, Sarlo states that, “[l]os más pobres sólo pueden conseguir fast-food televisivo; los menos pobres consumen eso y algunos otros bienes, mientras recuerdan las buenas épocas de la escuela pública adonde ya no pueden ir sus hijos o donde sus hijos ya no reciben lo que los padres recibieron; los otros, eligen dónde quieren, como en todas partes” (5-6).

2 Many critics examine the McOndo aesthetic from a variety of perspectives. For a more complete examination of McOndo, see Kelly Hargrave and Georgia Seminet, “De Macondo a ‘McOndo’: Nuevas Voces en la Literatura Latinoamericana”; Ivonne Cuadra, “De Macondo a McOndo: La tecno-narrativa de Alberto Fuguet”; Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat, “Literatura y globalización: Tres novelas post-macondistas.”

3 Gundermann criticizes Fuguet for what he calls a conservative vision that merely maintains the status quo rather than questioning it. This criticism highlights the fact that, like the Onda authors, Fuguet and Fresán might use similar techniques and subject matter but ideologically, Fuguet is much more conservative than Fresán.

4 The novel includes a small section based on Carlos Carlos which can be seen as a dialogue with Zolov. Carlos Carlos, who befriends Elvis, ends up being a corridos singer due to the wishes of his father Máximo. Carlos Carlos later is reduced to a state where the only sounds he can make are repetitions of the song, “La Bamba.”

5 Fuguet initially published Por favor, rebobinar in 1994. He later revised and added to the novel which was republished in 1999. Fuguet states that the second novel is the “director’s cut . . . Más que nuevos bonus tracks, siento que esto es un remix de la versión original” (7). It is this later edition that I am using.

6 Ivonne Cuadra also talks about this distance. She states, “Matías descubre que aunque los problemas personales lo llevaron a conocer otra realidad, otro ambiente, es importante mantener el orden al que está acostumbrado. La lectura de lo personal se desplaza a lo nacional haciendo una referencia histórica a la clase que apoyó la permanencia de la dictadura” (59).

7 The plebiscite process was certainly not without complications and irregularities. For more on the constitutional changes from both 1980 as well as the reforms of 1989, which led to the end of Pinochet’s regime see Mark Ensalaco, “In with the New, Out with the Old? The Democratising Impact of Constitutional Reform in Chile.”

8 Lynell Williams explains this overt recognition of consumption as a part of Chile’s neoliberal economic policies. Williams argues that, “[l]a clase privilegiada que lo produjo es producto del neoliberalismo –exceso en vez de escasez. Matías ve y siente los problemas pero es impotente para cambiarlos” (16).
Josh Remsen is the stock image of the rocker icon in the novels of Fuguet, exemplifying the connotations of rebellion and youth.

Even in the act of returning home, Matías parallels the story of Caulfield. *The Catcher in the Rye* ends with Caulfield explaining, “[t]hat’s all I’m going to tell about. I could probably tell you what I did after I went home, and how I got sick and all, and what school I’m supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don’t feel like it” (213). While Salinger’s character refuses to explain what happened after his rebellious trip, Fuguet dwells more on the aftermath of Matías journey, producing a clearer rupture with his rebellious attitude and a return to “normal” life.

María Nieves Alonso comments on the passive stance of Matías through her analysis of the bildungsroman genre. She states that, “[e]l resultado de este proceso [de conocimiento] es, en tiempo presente, un héroe eminentemente pasivo, ya que el conocimiento adquirido lo hace retraerse – acción válida- y le impide avanzar hacia otro lugar que no sea el de la protección y el resguardo” (12).

Žižek later states that, “[c]orporations such as Whole Foods and Starbucks continue to enjoy favor among liberals even though they both engage in anti-union activities; the trick is that they sell their products with a progressive spin. One buys coffee made with beans bought at above fair-market value, one drives a hybrid vehicle, one buys from companies that ensure good benefits for their staff and customers (according to the corporation’s own standards), and so on” (*First as Tragedy* 98).

Žižek himself makes a prime example of this. He is ideologically a staunch anti-capitalist, yet he has profited with his writing (fetish?) through the capitalist system. James Harkin states of an interview that, “Zizek spends his time roving between speaking engagements at institutions all over the world. He is leaving London first thing tomorrow, he tells me, for Paris to be profiled by the newspaper Libération. Then he is off to headline a Design Congress in Copenhagen (‘€7,500,’ he shouts to me, . . . , ‘first-class everything, and all that for 40 minutes selling them some old stuff’) and then it is back to Slovenia” (n.p.).

Patrick O’Connell argues that this consumerism is a way of dealing with the violence of the Pinochet dictatorship. O’Connell states that, “[t]he harsh reality of past political events is metaphorically shrouded by references to mass consumerism, placing the characters’ psyche in a state of amnesia and/or amanesis that ultimately distorts their perception of reality and of themselves” (33). According to O’Connell, the emphasis on global, largely North American products is a way of avoiding the realities of recent Chilean history. Thus, mass culture functions as a coping mechanism.

Bordieu argues that aesthetic taste is related to social class. Thus, taste is a process of conditioning that one obtains through the cultural and aesthetic values of the social class to which one belongs. See *Distinction* or “The Forms of Capital.”

Fresán examines the burden of the boom for young Latin American authors, commenting that for many there is la sensación inequívoca . . . de adentrarse en un territorio poblado por espejismos y fantasmas. Y el fantasma más grande de todos todavía vivía en la onda expansiva de su nombre dinamitante. Ya saben: el *boom*. Para la literatura latinoamericana, el *boom* es lo que el Génesis para la astronomía. ¡Hágase la luz
y rayos y centellas y de qué hablamos cuando hablamos del *boom* y el *boomy* cómo conseguirlo y el *boom*: Instrucciones de Uso! El *boom* fue y sigue siendo tan grande que se lo sigue buscando en todas partes y –si se me pregunta –a mí me parece que el *boom* es un tema de editores más que un tema de escritores. (“Apunte” 54-55)

17 The concept of future shock was proposed by Alvin Toffler in an article in 1965 and later developed in his book *Future Shock*. Toffler examines the psychological effects of a society in which technology is changing rapidly.

18 Augé argues that, “[i]f a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (77-78). The non-places that Augé theorizes are those locations which have little or no connection with the local and have no pretensions at conferring meaning.

19 This leads Edmundo Paz Soldán to categorize *Mantra* as a novel of the multiplicities of information, which he describes as works which register the world as a multiplicity through formal narrative experimentation and a preoccupation with information technologies (*Mantra* 100).

20 The narration explains the reason why the French narrator is sent to Mexico City in the first place, to write an article about tourism in Mexico City. The text could be, “a) Una lista lo más completa posible de todos los hombres célebres y mujeres famosas que alguna vez hayan pasado por esta maldita ciudad. . . . b) Tal vez una vital y reventada crónica à la Hunter Thompson . . . c) Quizá un fino y psicotrónico análisis sobre el cine de luchadores y fantástico mexicano . . . d) O, tal vez, algo sobre . . . sobre . . sobre tantas otras cosas” (472-73). This also helps explain the novel, which includes elements from all four options.

21 Brown argues that the MoviEye concept as a part of the cyborg or post-human, is a way of responding to the flaws of memory associated with the human body. He states, “film serves as a prosthetic brain that stores faithfully recorded images and sounds of the past. . . . we also see a multiplication of identity that further erodes the idea of a single human subject. The human is simultaneously a writer, actor, and director in this new situation, and is then converted into spectator when accessing the celluloid memories that the filmic life has produced” (149).

22 The French narrator of the second part complements the technological changes that Letra X describes. He states, “[h]acía un par de años que vivíamos, todos, adentro de una novela de ciencia-ficción (teléfonos móviles, ozono, vacas locas, uranio empobrecido, computadoras, turismo espacial, genoma), pero no nos dábamos cuenta de ello porque la invasión había sido lenta y secreta desde aquel pequeño paso para un hombre y salto gigante para la humanidad de 1969” (192-193).

23 Note the similarity between this and *Por favor, rebobinar*.

24 Máximo Mantra is clearly following the domination ideology of Horkheimer and Adorno. They state that, “[c]ulture has always played its part in taming revolutionary and barbaric instincts. Industrial culture adds its contribution. It shows the condition under which this merciless life can be lived at all” (152).
Dunia Gras articulates very well the importance of the pre-Colombian references in *Mantra* as well as the intertextuality with various canonical authors, like Juan Rulfo, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez, because of “la impresión de que buena parte de la narrativa latinoamericana última dejaba atrás las referencias telúricas o míticas, identificadas habitualmente con una temática rural” (73). She does not, however, address the fusion of myth and mass culture that occurs in the novel.

The text also refers to “Coatlicue, diosa protectora de todas las telenovelas mexicanas” (222).

The control discourse found in *Mantra* is strikingly similar to that in Manuel Puig’s novel *Pubis angelical* in which the control of the actors themselves is so extreme that it borders on the absurd.

The French narrator tells María-Marie that, “[t]e convertiste en un personaje de telenovela: la Mantra que no sabía que era Mantra, la sirvienta hermosa, la más bella de todas las mujeres y la más odiada por todas las mujeres y la más deseada por todos los hombres” (353), emphasizing the fusion of reality and mass culture through the trope of the unknown family member.

The narrator explains that, “Lupita Delmar hablaba –afuera y adentro de los estudios, adelante y atrás de las cámaras- como si su vida entera fuera una telenovela por capítulos” (346).

MTV stands for “*Mata-Tortura-Viola*” (517).

Benjamin states that, “[w]ith the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers – at first occasional ones” (234).

In refuting the idea of cultural imperialism, John Tomlinson talks of a study conducted by Ien Ang, which found that although consumption of the program Dallas was widespread, actual ideological manipulation was not necessarily present (45-50).


