

Unsilencing the House: the representation of living space in Mexico after 1985

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Introduction

In the following paper I explore the central role that the representation of living space played in the years 1985-2000, especially in Mexico City after the earthquake of September 1985. Living space and its representations are a key issue in Mexico's political imaginary, even as it also paradoxically has remained invisible in explicit private and public representations of Mexican history after the event, namely traditional historiography, while preserving its urgency in other media, such as television and film.

During this period the demographic concentration in the Valley of Mexico, that had already entered the stage when it was irreversibly jeopardizing the natural and economic balances of the region, undergoes a major crisis due to the earthquakes of September 19 and 20 1985. Even though the government manages to survive the problem and even win the presidential elections in 1988 and 1994, the economic pressures, the lack of credibility and the new social structure of the country crystallized against the seventy-one-year-long regime won by the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*: Party of the Institutional Revolution) in a landslide won by the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*: National Action Party) in 2000.

Although the economic rationale for this change and the gradual democratization of Mexico during the last decades of the century have been explored by several scholars, the role of civil society has been understated. In this context the representation of the house-as a mass-mediated artefact and as an object of desire, as the symbol of capitalistic triumph and as the thing actually lost after the earthquake-acts as one of the traces of a very powerful evolution.

The first part of the essay discusses the house as a cultural construct, thus exploring its symbolic importance in a situation of hegemonic struggle. This section also summarizes the history and demographics of

Mexico up to 1985 in order to provide the phenomenon of the modification of living space and its representations with the milieu that, even before the earthquake, forced living space into an urgent position among sociopolitical concerns in the Central Valley of Mexico.

The central sections of the paper examine September 19th and the crisis that ensued from it as seminal traumas for the processes that lead to Vicente Fox's triumph fifteen years later. Although both statistical evidence and mass-mediated reconfigurations are taken into account, the latter are privileged. The artefacts are divided in different groups:

a) Architectural texts: basically two living spaces, the *vecindades* (dilapidated tenement buildings) of the old downtown, and Tlatelolco, one of the major housing complexes created during the time of economic boom in the early sixties.

b) The literature of the earthquake, where the official document produced by the office of the President is compared to the chronicles and *testimonios* of the day.

c) Televisual/filmic texts: television schedules are juxtaposed to the cinematic production of the post-earthquake era, but central attention is paid to *El chavo del ocho*, a venerable and popular slapstick comedy that takes place in a *vecindad* and *Midaq Alley* (1994, Fons) the culminating product of the period and a clear precedent to the celebrated *Amores perros* (1998, González Iñárritu).

These three different forms of analysis create conic-shaped samples, as it were. Architectural texts were inscribed by the event itself, written texts were the immediate re-inscription of the event, and the visual texts I have chosen to analyze were released after 1986, when the trauma of the event was officially cured. As these texts decrease their immediacy to the events, the size of their readership grows.

In the last section of the essay, I reconsider the trajectory of the represented living space and extrapolate about the importance of living space in future hegemonical struggles, privileging once again the three cultural categories examined in the previous section. Will the represented house play a key role in the election of 2006, or in the re-invention of the PRI or in the struggles within the fragmented Mexican Left? Or will its symbolic currency decrease in favour of other, more urgent, loci?

The basic theoretical tools in the essay stem from historical materialism; as developed by Antonio Gramsci, including British Cultural Studies and Latin American Cultural Studies. My use of these models is in constant conversation with other analysis of symbolic systems-from the Roland Barthes of *Mythologies* to Jean Baudrillard but especially Gaston Bachelard-and critics of symbolic systems-centrally Derrida. I also draw

upon more traditional historians, both historians of society, such as Miguel Basáñez and of intimacy, such as Witold Rybczynski.

Although, arguably a product of historical materialism, Slavoj Žižek must be discussed more fully because he adds a whole psycho-clinical dimension, central to this paper. Without it, the intimate dimension of the sociopolitical transformation that took place from 1985 to 2000 is impossible to isolate and analyze. I superimpose Žižek's reading of the Lacanian difference between symptom and sinthome, and refoundation of the past from the present to the hegemonic tensions explored with more traditional tools.

The last methodological procedure that needs to be explained, for it could easily be misapprehended, is my existence in the essay. I draw on my own memories here not only because of the obvious weight that these events have in my own biography or as a mere reaffirmation of a postmodernist stance, but first of all, because the lack of literature on the subject justifies my presence as an informant; not less importantly, my personal experience offers a very sharp contrast to some of the obvious points a simple populist reading would want to draw. In other words, my history is uncomfortable for my theory, and forces more complex thought processes than those naturalized by the existing historiographical void, or even worse by the urban-legend status of this narrative. I exist in these pages, not because this is what happened to me--I neither lost my house during the earthquake nor was I paying a mortgage immediately after the real estate crisis of 1994--yet, I was close enough. I was the voter who was affected not by the direct effect of catastrophe but by its representation, by its (mis)appropriation, by its being silenced and glorified, minimized and exalted. So if I appear here at all, it is not as an anecdote, but as a witness who transverses--and muddies--the purity of the categorical structure I develop here.¹

The represented house in hegemonic struggle

In this section I sketch briefly the symbolic functions of the house, both actual and represented, which should help us to better understand what the earthquake of 1985 damaged, beyond the purely material.

“If we were to ask to name the chief benefit of the house,” wrote Gaston Bachelard, “I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace[...] the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.” (6) In other words, the house is the place where our individuality reaches its highest possibilities of realization, for it protects

us, however illusorily, from the sphere of the public, creating the illusion of the private as an isolated if not impenetrable sphere.²

Conversely the chief benefit of the representation of houses, it could be formulated thus: He who creates representations of houses controls the scope of human thoughts, memories and dreams, in the moment when mankind feels quite free.

Thirdly, the representation of the house as object of desire creates lifescapes that tend to have a climactic moment that coincides with the acquisition of a certain living-space-in the most obvious instance, a suburban house as opposed to an inner-city apartment. This representation-as-desire is later incorporated into the design of the actual houses, conditioning the conduct carried out in the living space and creates an extremely effective ideological deployment.³

Finally there is a corollary: He who manages to represent himself as the agent of housing is tacitly providing us with the gift of dreams, memory and thought; that, plus a refuge against nature, and ultimately a refuge against inexistence for only he who occupies a fixed space is granted the privilege of recognition in an organized society-a house is also its address, the direction where any address that concerns us should be oriented. This is clearly proven by the total social marginality of those with “no fixed address”.

Besides their obvious correspondence with privacy, the functions Bachelard attributes to the house also occupy fixed places in temporality. Memory has an obvious relation with the past, while dreams connect with the future and thought with the present, and although, more complex modes of overlapping could be drawn, it would always be with the certainty that the entire span of subjective time is related to the space enclosed by houses. This delicate web of relationships is almost invisible, but becomes quite apparent as one of the central loses when the house is menaced or damaged, and even more so, when this destruction is not gradual but the ravaging effect of a violent instant. This was the case of Mexico in 1985.

I call the group of functions associated with the protective interior of the house, this productive situation-for they provoke discursive activity-the fruit of silence, “I am in work like the pit is inside the fruit”, wrote Rilke in August the 3rd, 1907 (quoted in Blanchot).

There is another group of functions, associated with the limits of the living space-this is to say the exterior of the house-which I will call the silenced kernel. They keep the discursive production created in the living space within certain limits; they stifle the exchange in the direction of the public sphere, they guarantee that a discursive remnant will forever remain silenced. This silencing is the price that must be paid for the silence, for the

silenced kernel, this part of discourse that remains forever private, is the condition of possibility of the fruit of silence: the portion of discourse that the house publishes, as it were.

An example of this economy is the Mexican tenement-house or *vecindad*, of which I will extensively write below. In the *vecindad*, washing boards and water faucets-any times a single working water faucet-are communal spaces, where enormous amounts of conversation take place. Many of these conversations have a political nature, but they never leave the realm of the court of the *vecindad*; they are never deployed into the public flux of discourse becoming political action. Thus, the very protected court that creates a space for these conversations to take place, also acts as the silencing device that prevents their content from reaching the street, the Palace of Government. As we will see, the liberation (fruition) of these silenced kernels was another of the central effects of the earthquake.

Now when we take the whole system we have the prime site of what Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling.” The term designates the areas where culture and society as fixed forms “expressed in a habitual past form” no longer can explain personal present experience. This is to say, the moment when an “emergent” formation is not yet completely articulate.

In other words, the house is the place where the self confronts the determinations of History. Williams observes that structures of feeling “do not have to wait definition, classification or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.” (Williams 128-135) This means, in effect, that the house is a highly desirable site for hegemonic pressure to be exerted, but at the same time a locus from where counter-hegemonic formations originate; and both processes are indeed consequences of the same foundational economy of (relative) isolation.

One further question must then be posed. What media are used to effectively represent living spaces, thus influencing the economies we have just examined? First of all, houses themselves. When a living space is the other’s living space, it remains a representation of what the experience of inhabiting it might be like. Thus, if our house acts as a synecdoche of our biography, other houses act similarly; condensing different lifescapes, more or less fortunate, happy or comfortable than our own. One of the pervading determinations of the desirable house is obviously the economic, but other than that it is hard to determine what imposes a model of living space. Perhaps conditions such as the location, safeness, and cleanness-which can ultimately be argued to relate to the economic-can be added to our list. They do not, however, explain why certain houses, given that they are

equally safe, clean, well located and expensive, create different degrees of desire, and, much less why is one systematically preferred over the other.

One of the answers to this question is visual media. The glib representations of television—from the living-rooms of sitcoms, to the mansions and schematic *vecindades* (tenement buildings) of *telenovelas* (soap operas), to the ranches and farms and early urban vistas of mid-century cinema—even when violently opposed to (immediate) reality, offer an immediate model of what is to be desired. They are advertisements for houses, and as Witold Ribczynski, the keen observer of comfort, puts it, “advertisements often represent a not altogether real, stylized world, but one which does reflect society’s view of how things *ought* to be.” (11) I would add not only do they reflect but they actually create and enforce these views.

Even when they are complementary, a basic difference between architectural texts and visual texts remains. Architecture stresses the defensive functions of the house, showing the magnificence of the exterior while keeping the interior hidden. By contrast, visual texts penetrate into the living space proper and show the actual performance of life. Literary texts, much less expansive in terms of audience than visual texts, consistently offer the deepest explorations of behavior in the living space and frequently provide—I think for instance of Thomas Mann’s *The Buddenbrooks*—the only extended portrait of the history of a living space, revealing a temporal dimension that frequently remains static in visual narratives and secret in architectonic texts.

When we link together these modes of representation a third function of the house is revealed: its importance as a place of receptive silence used for the consumption of literary and visual texts.⁴ This is especially true in Mexico: “En la ‘perdida década’ de los ochenta la única industria que se desarrolló en América Latina fue la de la comunicación.” (Barbero, quoted in García Canclini 27)⁵ Home-based media especially witnessed an explosive growth. “De los 16 millones de hogares mexicanos más de 13 millones cuentan con televisor.” (ibid. 36)⁶ In many of the overcrowded living spaces of Latin America, privacy and intimacy are only achieved through the silence commanded by the television set, that is to say both that there is a reversal of the economy previously described, and that the predominant experiences of living space comfort are vicarious and only achieved in electric space.⁷

A brief history

In the following sections I reproduce the narratives of several of the best authorized histories of Mexico currently available, where the role of

civil society is all but absent, and democracy seems to be just a by-product of an undefeatable economic logic. Although some of these ideas are useful as bedrock for our later argument, they basically parallel the lines of the official discursivity that must be challenged in order to fully understand the recent political phenomena.

I want to argue here that the 1985 earthquake was an event that changed the unified field of ideology in Mexico, and did it in such a deep fashion that it must be considered as one of the central elements that led to the first opposition president in modern Mexico.

The earthquake occurs in the midst of the so-called “austerity years” that defined Miguel de la Madrid’s term in office (1982-1988). De la Madrid is considered to be the first neo-liberal president in Mexico. He cut on public spending severely and managed to pay every installment of the public debt until 1986, thus winning back the confidence of the international financial community. On the other hand, these cutbacks damaged the already impoverished standards of living within the country, and this development was especially bitter after the hopes raised by the oil boom of 1977-1981.

By 1986 president de la Madrid announces that payments of the external debt could no longer be met, and unless the conditions change, the country will stop paying. The call works to a certain extent. Internal economic conditions, however, do not improve, especially for the middle and working classes. But it is here, where most historians—even the cream of the crop: Basáñez, Sherman and Meyer, Ai Camp—fail to see what seems so evident to cultural theorists and fiction writers-like Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska respectively-: the significance of the earthquake as the key event that forced the attention of the State from the outside to the domestic, or, in other words, to the silenced kernels of the country as living space.

Interestingly, during this period the stock exchange registers an unprecedented growth: the index jumps from 676 in December 1982 to 343,545 in September 1987. The causes are complex but none relates directly to the economic performance of the country: in fact, the stock exchange index and the GNP have an inverse relationship.⁸ Basically it was fueled by the fact that both government and private capital used “casas de bolsa” (stock brokers) as the preferred medium to obtain credit, given that nationalized banks stopped injecting money into the market in 1985. By October 1987, the stock exchange suffered the inevitable crash. By December the index had reached 105,670 points, less than a third of its value in September. This proves, besides evident corruption and double

financial standards, that economic attention had also shifted to tap internal resources.

Demographics

The figures of population growth and concentration provide us with very solid evidence as to why living space surged as the focus of attention immediately after the earthquake. This is to say, demographics explain the preexisting pressures that raised this issue to the center stage of national attention

Between 1980 and 1990 the degree of urbanization-this is to say the percentage of the population living in cities-reaches 61.9% in Mexico. Of this urban population, the majority-62.6%-lives in cities of more than 500, 000 people. Even though the growth rate of the city diminished during this decade from 6.1 to 5%, Mexico City alone concentrates 18.7% of the total population of the nation. (cf. Garza Villarreal 233) The trend towards urbanization has continued: by 1995 the urban population constituted 64.3% of the total, and the estimate for 2000 is 68%. Large cities house 67.8% of this. Between 1990 and 1995 the population of Mexico City increased by 1.7 million people. (235)

This increasing demographic concentration in Mexico City seems paradoxical, for bad economic and ecological conditions had combined to deteriorate the quality of life in the urban zone of the Valley of Mexico. Many of the problems of the city, such as pollution, insecurity, multiplication of informal street-vendors, traffic jams, and lack of housing, culminated during this period. From 1970 to 1976 the construction of new lines of the Metro stopped, and the subsequent decade of the 1980s is commonly dubbed the 'lost decade.' The attraction of the city of the city for migrants and even for its previous dwellers should have diminished. Yet the imposition of a neoliberal model from 1982 produced several modifications to the economic structure and to the employment model. It accelerated the centralization of capital and the denationalization of the local enterprises, creating a growth in the tertiary sector that has its site primarily in Mexico City.

Although growth patterns remain unchanged, the number of people per household has diminished: it was 5.41 in 1980 and 4.76 in 1990 (396). It is interesting to note that in 1990, 69% of the households owned or were buying their living spaces and 31% rented them. Even more interesting is the fact that this proportion is practically the same in the middle and in the lower classes (390). This odd parity of ownership across classes might be caused by the historical management of expansion in the Valley of Mexico, where usually a first phase of territorial expansion, typically illegal, is

tolerated and then followed by augmenting population density by selectively adding potable water, electricity, bus and van routes and other services to the colonized areas. These de facto situations are then recognized legally, for example, through new zoning rules. This method of real-estate acquisition is not available to the middle classes.⁹

It is not hard to read all of these factors as a combination that creates enormous pressure on housing: making living space more and more difficult to purchase, but at the same time jeopardizing the relative protection that a house affords from the increasingly violent¹⁰ outside, that is one of the basic tenets of living space. This is to say, that the house becomes a more urgent object of desire, while it functions less and less effectively as a physical defense against danger and as a realm of the purely private, as its space proves more and more porous.

Texts and silences

I will proceed with what I take to be a typical reaction to the event of the earthquake. It is my own, but this should in no way indicate anything but the innocence of the eye chosen to be punished. Perhaps the testimonio of any other writer, especially somebody already mature, would be more palatable, but it wouldn't serve the purpose of showing the silencing of an important moment in the country's history not by malice in part of the author, but by the sheer mechanisms of reception that maintain the status quo.

In my personal life-story, on the other hand, the year 1985 is crucial. The reasons are not economic. I was living in Mexico City and I was getting ready to go to school when the September 19 earthquake struck. It was very powerful, but the house was not damaged. In fact we considered the *temblor* mild enough to go to school. My brothers and I rode the twenty or so kilometers without noticing any major damage. Once we got to the Colegio Madrid, its five year-old southern location, we were told that a wall had cracked and there would be no classes until a further assessment of the structural soundness of the buildings was completed. The school remained closed until late in October, and then only a part of the buildings were used, largely because of structural reinforcements, that were taking place while the students crowded in shaky prefabricated classrooms. But that lurked only in the future. That morning, we rode back home and instead of playing side b of the Rush tape we had listened to on the way there, we began to learn about the true magnitude of the 'tragedy' (that favorite word of Mexican media) listening to the radio and later, already home when the signal was back, on television.

What remains central is the fact that between September 19th and my return to classes, at the age of fourteen, I began to write regularly. I wish I could play hero of cultural performance and say that my diary is full of references to the earthquake, but I must confess otherwise. It is a corny notebook plagued with the commonplace woes of early adolescence. This of course can be read as a sign of my stupidity (which it is) but I think of it also as a patent index of an operation of silencing.

My personal failure to address the rise of a major structure of feeling, one that is now dominant, can first be located in the fact that the *temblor* happened somewhere else. My friends and relatives were alive, their houses seemed safe, my telephone was working, and although the school had closed, not even the few people attending early lessons had received injuries. The only exception was a high school girl who panicked and jumped from a second story balcony. She didn't even spend the night in the hospital. It is the subsequent absence of the earthquake from my journals which seems much more important, especially alongside the question of why the urgency to write arose just then.¹¹

If certain narratives do convey the first symptoms of a structure of feeling attempting to fully articulate its "semantic figures" (Williams 133), the vast majority, especially in the very moment of the crisis, try to ignore it if possible or, at least, explain it away in terms of the current hegemonic discourse, or in other words silencing its kernels so it won't disturb the house with forbidden fruits.

As Gramsci put it in one of his seminal pieces regarding hegemonical struggle after a moment of severe change in sociopolitical conditions, such as the one that Mexicans experienced in 1985

What matters is the criticism to which such an ideological complex is subjected by the first representatives of the new historical phase. This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, even incidental, is now taken to be primary--becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex (Gramsci cited in Hall 237)

The best explanation of how this process actually comes about is that provided by Slavoj Žižek's reading of the theory of ideology originally proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Žižek explains that "the multitude of 'floating signifiers', this is proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point.'" (87) He reads this nodal point as the Lacanian *point de capiton*¹² which acts as the center around which the rest of the signifiers are

fixated. The question is, of course, how does this “*point de capiton*” intervene exactly. This is key to our thinking the Mexican earthquake. For it follows the logic of the event as we will see bellow.

An event is defined as that which makes possible a creation of a new unified field through the substitution of the constitutive nodal point. I want to argue here that the 1985 earthquake was an event that changed the unified field of ideology in Mexico, and did it in such a deep fashion that it must be considered as one of the central elements that led to the first opposition president in modern Mexico. The first pertinent question is then what acted as the nodal point previously and what substituted for it. If we examine the *sexenio* of Miguel de la Madrid up to this point, it is quite obvious that the Debt, symbolizing the economic reconfiguration of the country, thus leaving the political proper behind, was the *point de capiton* and that, after September 19th, it was displaced by Living Space, with all its associations to the interior, to reconstruction and to a new concern about individuals. It is telling that de la Madrid was the first president of Mexico trained as an economist, while his predecessors had all attended Law School.¹³

This, still has not answered the question of how exactly the Debt was replaced by Living space. The best way to map the process is starting with the seemingly paradoxical affirmation that the earthquake did **not** destroy the city, but actually (re)founded it. Now, instead of merely theorizing about it, let us observe this in very immediate texts. In what is, by far, the best document written about the earthquake, Carlos Monsiváis shows two basic moments:

En un instante las seguridades se trituran. Un paisaje inexorable desplaza al anterior. Cascajo, mares de cascajo, varillas, la desolación es el mar de objetos sin sentido, de edificios como grandes bestias heridas o moribundas [...] El llanto desplaza a la incomprensión. El azoro anula el llanto. En los rostros lívidos las preguntas se disuelven informulas. El dolor asimila el pasmo. El pasmo interioriza el sentido de la tragedia. (25)¹⁴

The first phase is that of change, a change so extreme that it defies incorporation into the symbolic. One must note how well Monsiváis captures the metonymical relation between the subject’s confidence and her living space with the first sentence: “En un instante las seguridades se trituran”, what was actually crushed are buildings, but with them, the foundations of the day to day are fractured. In “la desolación es un mar de objetos sin sentido” Monsiváis again proves how part of the shock is tied to meaninglessness to the devastation of the illusory fixation of signs. “En los rostros lívidos las preguntas se disuelven informulas” forcefully conveys

a mood where not only answers but even the means to arrive at them have vanished.

The second moment, is defined by action—the action of moving rubble, paying close attention to cries for help that come from under the debris, bringing food, water, clothes to the survivors, organizing traffic--and, through action, comprehension : “La súbita revelación de estas capacidades le añade a la capital un nuevo espacio ético y civil, en franca oposición a las creencias del Estado paternalista que nunca reconoce la mayoría de edad de sus pupilos.” (33)¹⁵

In his essay “From Symptom to Sinthome” where he examines the nature of trauma and its relationship with the notion of time as formative of the self, Slavoj Žižek asserts that “The past exists [only] as it is included, as it enters into the synchronous net of the signifier” (56); this is to say, in effect, that the past is constituted of signifiers that can reshape into different unified fields, that are ultimately governed by the logic of the present. But even more interesting is the narrative of the process that Žižek proposes. In order for the past to penetrate the texture of the present, when “the subject is confronted with a scene from the past that he wants to change, to meddle with, to intervene in; he takes a journey into the past, and it is not that he ‘cannot change anything’--quite the contrary, only through his intervention does the scene from the past *become what it always was*” (58 his emphasis). So, in order for the ‘past’ to remain possible, this is to say, in order to stablish effectively a new nodal point, a work, not entirely dissimilar to that of dreamwork, must always be performed.

My contention is that in the case of Mexico City, the manipulation of the rubble, the rescue of the bodies, the exploration of what should have been there, is a very physical manifestation of this action of re-placing the past of reconfiguring it around a new nodal point. Two architectural forms take particular significance in the imaginary of the city’s past: the *vecindades* and Tlatelolco—the old tenement houses and the urban housing projects of the second half of the twentieth century, where a large percentage of the population of the city lived. These living spaces had been most effectively silenced in the neo-liberal discourse of de la Madrid--and the work in and about them extremely important as architectural texts. This not only because of their demographic density, but also because they represented stages of the city that had already been superseded according to the neo-liberal discourse of progress, and that after September 19, recovered their actuality.

But before we engage with these architectural texts, we can contrast them with others, such as my infamous early diaries, which in the wake of

a major hegemonic reconfiguration seem to cling to residual formations as attempts of a different kind to perform this reincorporation of the past to the present. The simplest explanation would be to characterize these efforts as simple reactionary backlashes that attempt to revert to inexistence the cathetical fluxes of the emerging models in order to regain the commodious immobility of status quo.

Although the simplicity of this binary may prove useful in thinking the poles of the hegemonic conflict and I will continue to use it if only because it is the only practicable way to think this phenomenon within the scope of this essay, we must remain aware that it leaves out an appallingly large amount of texts; all those that, instead of rejecting or accepting the new nodal point wholesale, probe the construction of narratives around it, proceeding as if it were possible to test them against external solid facts.

Architecture

First of all, let us define the kind of texts we are working with, in terms of the population they housed, their origins and the depth of their significance in the urban imaginary of Mexico in order to understand afterwards, the profundity of the impact caused by the 1985 earthquake both in the housing capabilities of the city and its representative schema.

Vecindades are part of the class that Garza Villarreal calls *colonias populares*: popular neighborhoods with a high population density of 153 people per hectare and in some regions, such as El Centro (historic downtown), where the *vecindades* are usually located, it can reach 300. Although their basic urban equipment is always lacking in some way, *colonias populares* house more than 63% of the population of the city and they occupy 40% of its surface. (393)

Vecindades were the typical living space for rent up to the 1970's, but later they became oversaturated, especially because of the *ley de rentas congeladas* (frozen rents law i.e. rent-control), that was put in effect during World War II to prevent speculation, but has remained both on the books and fiercely enforced by the tenants. The buildings that house *vecindades* pre-date the law-more often than not they were built in the nineteenth century and it is not uncommon to find some dating from the pre-independence period-and were not designed to be used as apartments. Rather they are large houses whose rooms have been subdivided into smaller units that lack running water, appropriate ventilation and of course sufficient space for the families that rent them. Worse, as the owners receive next to nothing for rent, practically no money was ever spent for the keeping up of the facilities.

Vecindades received a considerable amount of attention during the sixties, largely because of the interest created by Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sánchez* (1961). The book was originally published and then taken out of print by the State-owned Fondo de Cultura Económica, and subsequently reprinted by the private publishing house Joaquín Mortiz who managed to sell 13 editions. *The Children of Sánchez* shocked because it effaced the voice of Lewis, who interviewed at length the members of a family living in a *vecindad* and presented his readers with an autopsy of a house. After reading the book it is almost inevitable to conclude that the insurmountable disgrace the Sánchez family must endure is ultimately caused by their (expanded) living space.

But the State had the answer. In fact, Tlatelolco was the diamond in the crown of its master plan of modern housing projects (*unidades habitacionales*) that were to replace *vecindades*. These large spaces planned after the ideas of Le Corbusier and French urbanism many times were designed to be self-contained; that is, they included much of the urban equipment necessary for the community within their boundaries, pushing the city away from the unifocal mode of development with its core still in El Centro. The Tlatelolco project was started in the same year *The Children of Sánchez* was published and although it was not properly finished until 1966, Tlatelolco was officially inaugurated two years earlier—after all, who can deny himself this small imprecision when the period in office is about to come to its end.¹⁶

Unidades habitacionales like Tlatelolco house 2.2 million people in Mexico City, that is, 14.5% of the population of the city, this is roughly twice as much as *vecindades*. Although this figure sound hopeful, for the *unidades habitacionales* were designed to provide better living conditions than older housing options, they underwent a rapid process of 'vecindadification,' which became absolutely obvious in 1985.

Tlatelolco was designed to house a thousand people but ended up with more than one hundred and fifty thousand (cf. Monsiváis 55). Its *cuartos de azotea* (service rooms) were already up for rent by 1966, and the poor quality of its rushed construction forced the administrators to undertake preventive reconstruction of the foundations of the Nuevo León building in 1983, after much pressure. Despite this "effort" the Nuevo León collapsed in the earthquake.

Tlatelolco has a very deep symbolic claim on the imaginary of the city. It is the site of the magnificent Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Three Cultures Plaza); where the old Colegio de la Santa Cruz stood. Here, after the conquest, the Franciscans taught a generation of indians how to write and speak Spanish and Latin. Subsequently the school was banned.

Tlatelolco was the site of one of my last visits in Mexico City before coming to the United States in the summer of the year 2000. The Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Foreign Affairs Secretariat) and the American Embassy co-sponsored a lunch for the departing generation of Fulbright fellows. The tone was vaguely menacing, for the basic message of every speech was that we were obliged, not only morally, to return to Mexico upon the completion of our academic programs.

On the way home, I walked across the Unidad Habitacional Tlatelolco, where the memories of the 1968 student massacre and the 1985 earthquake still linger among the optimistic parks and the many posters of local neighbor-committees, and the menacing graffiti against the impending privatization of electricity.

The answers to the earthquake crisis, both immediate and mediate, reveal antithetical patterns on the part of the government and of the residents. Let us briefly return to the moment preceding September 19, to examine the invisibility of *vecindades* and *unidades habitacionales*, especially as the single symbolic economy they always already formed. In order to do this, we must introduce a third urban aggregation; the *cinturón de miseria* (misery belt) that surrounded the city when migration could no longer be absorbed by cheap housing within the historic city limits. Although a consequence of the very same trends that made overcrowded *vecindades* necessary and *unidades habitacionales* helplessly insufficient, the *cinturón de miseria* functioned symbolically in a different manner, for it created an outside where the problems of overpopulation (with all its apocalyptic fears) could be banished. This was made possible in part by the process of turning Mexico City into a multifocal city; multifocality entails a reorientation of the gaze from the omphalos of El Centro, to the ever-receding horizons of the city limits. In practice, it was no longer necessary to go downtown in order to find anything or even on business; yet driving through the the slums remained unavoidable in order to escape the city in the direction of Pachuca, Toluca, Puebla or Cuernavaca. In other words, the city had turned its popular housing problem into a silenced kernel.

A commentary by Carlos Monsiváis, regarding the situation of the Colonia Morelos—one of the *colonias populares* of the downtown area--a few days after the earthquake is an interesting index of why the *vecindades* returned to the center of the public gaze and remained there:

15.5% de las viviendas afectadas por entero; 72.2% parcialmente afectadas; 11% no afectadas. Y, de manera previsible, en el 53.9% de las viviendas totalmente destruidas se pagaba menos de 500 pesos de renta, y en las menos afectadas se pagaba más de 15 mil pesos de renta. [...] Miles se resisten al traslado a los albergues

oficiales. Prefieren el hacinamiento en calles y jardines [...] Lo que sea, con tal de no alejarse de sus antiguas viviendas.(Monsiváis 107)¹⁷

The sheer percentage is shocking, but the will to remain there went beyond the mere fate of property under rubble or lost memories. Even in the cases when the families were not expecting one of their members to be brought out from underneath the ruins, the fear remained. Fear of what? Simply put, of being expelled back to invisibility. “Si tu casa está en peligro de caer, instálate en la calle. No abandones la colonia,”(quoted in Monsiváis)¹⁸ repeated the signs posted around the neighborhood. The same processes: living next to the ruins of the building, holding manifestations for the media (perennial, largely thanks to Plácido Domingo who had family members under the rubble and created a very powerful focus of attention), marching the streets demanding justice for what they deemed as murder.

The presence of heavy machinery was dreaded, first of all because it meant giving up on the rescue of bodies, but then because it implied the substitution of the citizen chains by the power apparatus of the State and the erasure of the last material traces of the living space; the symbolic Thing occupying the space of the Real loss, that symbolic object everybody could see, and thus could act as the goal of collective cathexis. The people who did not lose their living space, deemed the problem solved or at least partially solved when the ruins disappeared. This moment shows clearly the fully structured response devised by the State to the work of structuring a unified field:

La confianza en los procesos autogestionarios se esparce, y las autoridades lo resienten. [...] El lunes 23 el gobierno emite la consigna: normalización, es decir, regreso a las fórmulas de obediencia incondicional. [...]

Al rechazo a la ‘normalización’ lo dirige la ira por el aporte humano a la catástrofe. ¿Qué tanto extendieron la tragedia las construcciones deficientes, fruto de la rapiña? [...]

Los funcionarios adulan alternativa y simultáneamente al pueblo, la juventud, la sociedad civil, la solidaridad, pero el resentimiento antigubernamental suspende la credibilidad y dificulta en extremo la ‘normalización’. (Idem. 41, 2)¹⁹

Monsiváis is right once again when he claims that the true meaning of *normalización* is a return to the previous way of life, thus to the previous way of governing; this is the true moment of hegemonic struggle whose

signification has eluded so many historians. This is the first moment that must be re-examined from the vantage point marshaled by the 2000 election. While the State refuses the formation of a new unified field, it finds impossible to reject the existence of important collective formations. The applause of the State, however, and its inclusion of *solidarity* or *youth*, in the official discourse is not innocent.

To show this more clearly, let us examine the way the events are emplotted by the narrative produced by the office of the president. About the 23rd, the pamphlet states: “President de la Madrid[...] visits shelters and listens to the requirements of earthquake victims, who basically request new housing and accommodations.” (6)

In this narrative an individual-the hero-providing father-president and of course his Name-has been produced. Around him, events revolve.

Media, and especially television, favor the individual story over the collective narrative. Under the shadow of the paternal figure of the President, lesser heroes bud: la Pulga, a rescue worker; Monchito, a young boy waiting to be rescued under the rubble and sending telepathic messages to his father (of course it all turns out to be a fraud to rescue a safe); Nancy Reagan, who visits the city; Plácido Domingo and the painter Felipe Ehrenberg; even Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska, at work in books that attempt to create a collective memory, are individualized and celebrated by the cameras.

The hero acts as a tranquilizer in the context of the call to “normalization”, as his presence becomes more and more pervasive on the media, the common people are forced into the comfortable subject-position of the contemplator of the inevitable non-hero. This is to say that the hero is only the celebrated, mediated hero, and even that possibility is offered as not entirely desirable. A very clear example is the testimonio of this young man, voluntary rescue worker:

Tú el otro día hablabas de la toma de poderes, no la gran toma del Poder, con Bastillas y todo, sino de otra toma, la apropiación de deberes y derechos democráticos. Pues ahora échale un ojo a la retoma de insignificancias que se nos propone, qué bien hicieron, qué bien se portaron, pónganse en la solapa esta medalla de buena conducta y váyanse a su casa. Mi papá, por ejemplo, del jueves 19 al domingo 22 me veía como a paladín de la tele, y luego fue cambiando, ya estuvo bien, bájale el tono, no te metas de redentor, ya párale, qué ganas con andar de payaso con cinta roja y tapabocas. Ya cálmate, no vas a resucitar a nadie, tu deber es estudiar para agarrar empleo. Y sí, claro, mi mamá me contó que dicen en la tele que la ciudad volvió a la normalidad, todo el mundo

*contento por estar triste, dejen a los muertos enterrar a los muertos, y al Señor Regente encabezar la gran Reconstrucción. ¿Sabes qué? A eso no le entro (Monsiváis 36)*²⁰

This shows of course how the people that occupied this subject position once, will not easily budge, even when hailed simultaneously by the ideological apparatus of the state and by the private media.

While the process of normalization was continued-during the years that followed the earthquake, the government of president Miguel de la Madrid stepped into action and built almost 50,000 living-spaces- the hero-position was effectively suppressed and that of the *damnificado* (the victims of the disaster) who finally accepted the gift was privileged. Civil society, the collective understanding of a different city, remained.

We should read the following testimonios as representative of the narrative proposed by the State gone awry. Rafael López Jiménez, who collected them, was a bureaucrat working in one of the offices devoted to helping *damnificados*. First of all we have the moment of the promise:

Pues sí, estoy contenta. Van a mejorar las casas. Nuevas, ¡qué diferencia! Mire nomás las condiciones en las que vivimos. Yo ya le había dicho a mi marido que debíamos ir a buscar otro lugar, porque francamente este ambiente ya no me gusta para mis hijos (López Jimenez 20)²¹

Then, we have the moment when one of the lucky ones gets a new living space, and it is not in a remote are of the city, and it is fully functional. The damnificada produces not only proof of her gratitude to the state for the house, but for the refoundation of the home as well:

*Yo no me quejo. Mi casita tiene todas las comodidades. Mi marido anda recuperándose; casi no toma y ya me trajo un mantel, unas colchas anaranjadas y una jarra. Dice que vamos a empezar de nuevo, pero quién sabe. (Idem. 32)*²²

Finally the telling moment when the community finally accepts the actions of the government but the cohesion achieved during the earthquake is preserved after the gift: the sense of solidarity, the importance of civil society, the discourse produced by the ravaged houses is not silenced by the new ones:

Yo no tengo nada que criticar. Han venido gentes de algunos partidos de oposición a proponernos cosas y los mandamos a volar, no porque seamos del PRI, sino porque vemos lo que hace el gobierno y lo reconocemos como bueno, entonces no vamos a causar problemas

--¿Crees que en la vivienda nueva puedan encontrar ese orden establecido en el campamento?

-¡Claro! Va a continuar nuestra organización; vamos a tener una directiva que la sostenga. Ya les dijimos a las Marías que van a pintar sus casas del color que quieran, como sus vestidos, como sus listones; y que adentro podrán hacer lo que quieran, pero que afuera nos vamos a respetar todos.“ (Idem. 53)²³

Visual texts

Of course the spectacular reconfigurations that surge immediately after the earthquake are easier to isolate and understand than the mid and long-term processes, because of they are slower to fructify. How can we track the latter? On the one hand the many marches, *plantones* (sit ins, camp ins), and of course the pressure that, if finally lead to the dubious victory of the PRI in 1988, also forced the creation of an independent electoral institute and an elected government for Mexico City are direct, visible concretizations of this change, of a new civil society ready to ask and obtain niches in the political structure of the country; on the other, the apparently less political modes of representation offered by the media, and centrally by the incredibly influential visual media; the electric sphere. An analysis of the television programs broadcast during the period of the earthquake and immediately afterwards²⁴ show inanity, inanity that remains absolutely unchanged by the events.

I remember myself watching a rock-video show when the second earthquake struck. In the show, there was no intermission to mention the earthquake, its victims or any way to help them. Yet, when the analysis of the televisual offerings becomes central is in the mediate period. One year after, when the September earthquake had all but disappeared from the news (8/25/1986) Chespirito was already being broadcast during prime time.

Roberto Gómez Bolaños, a.k.a. Chespirito (little Shakespeare), is a phenomenon himself: he wrote, directed and acted a comic sketch show, that has been successful in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking United States for more than three decades now.²⁵ The center of the program, and this is what it makes it relevant, is a character called *El Chavo del 8* (The kid from number 8): an orphan who inhabits not apartment number 8 but a barrel set in the middle of the patio in a *vecindad*. Most of the humor of the show is slapstick, and idiotically repetitive at that.

What is really striking is the ultimate deterritorialization²⁶ that has been performed on the *vecindad*. It is a very cheap set that has remained

practically unchanged for years; and there is almost no action in any other places: once every few episodes, a classroom scene, or a game in a vacant lot but next to none in the actual living space of the *vecindad* or on the street where it is set. The patio houses the barrel, a birdcage, several flowerpots, a wood-operated water heater, a couple of exchangeable gas tanks and the quintessential communal washing boards (*lavaderos*) and clotheslines (*tendederos*).

The clothes of the characters are supposed to remind somebody of some fashion pertaining to forgotten childhoods, but as the actors are adults and their clothing never changes, the result is as far as can be from realism, and already by 1986 all of them were dressed as nothing but themselves. This is not uncommon in the Mexican electric space. This parallels how *charros* (Western Mexico cowboy outfit) in local countryside filmic fictions dress with their improbable black suits with silver ornaments and huge hats that would be more at home in an American living room after a visit to Tijuana than on any Mexican head, or Dolores del Río barefoot and in indian *huipil* but with her delicately penciled eyebrows.

There is another interesting deterritorialization phenomenon: the time when the actions take place in *El Chavo del Ocho* is impossible to determine. The lighting of the set is always the same. Both adults and children are there, even the Profesor Jirafales (Professor Giraffeson), who we are certain has a job, appears once and again. Yet there is no talk of previous activities of the day. In fact, nobody has any recollection of the past whatsoever. Nobody remembers they have enacted the same routines over and over, not only for the last decades but for the last half hour.

With the reinstatement of Chespirito in channel 2, the cycle of the earthquake in mass media may be deemed complete: the *vecindad* has been pushed back again to the territory of nostalgia, now forever unattainable **thanks** to the earthquake. The message sent by media is the following: sadly a lot of people died in the earthquake, but we should be thankful, because now the *vecindad*—as the *carpa*: the semiformal vaudeville theater that preceded mass media as the central form of comic entertainment in Mexico to which Chespirito is a direct heir—no longer exists. Or rather, it is preserved in electric space. The crisis of living space that enabled the crystallization of a very strong civil society is officially buried. We can laugh idiotically while the State builds houses for the *damnificados*.

Yet, immediately after this period, several films begin to explore the changes produced in the city in 1985: the first is *Lola* (María Novaro, 1989), which tells a story of hardship and motherly love protagonized by a hawker and her daughter, indexing the before and after. The more striking

sequences in which Lola takes Ana to her grandmother's house, revisit the sites devastated by the earthquake, the still scarred city.

After *Lola*, several other films were released with the same earthquake consciousness.²⁷ Unsurprisingly enough, many of the people involved in these films make a living in the television industry, but the differences are obvious: all of the films I mentioned were produced--partially at least--by the state owned Imcine, which is not profit-driven²⁸, and seems to enjoy, along with the publishing industry, a lot of freedom from the official discursive practices. During this epoch, Imcine underwent a renovation that ultimately resulted in the best Mexican films since the 40's. The most salient example is *Amores perros / Love's a bitch* (González-Iñárritu, 1999), but the cycle also includes other works such as *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (Serrano, 1998) or *Todo el poder* (Sariñana, 1998) where the new Mexico City--devastated by crime, grim, overpopulated--established as the cinematic backdrop in the previous decade, reaffirms its presence in the big-screen imaginary. In *La ley de Herodes* (Estrada, 1998) a harsh critique of the PRI, the edenic quality of the countryside is severely deconstructed towards a vision of unified national reality of political inconformity. One further sign of change comes from the foundation of Altavista Films, the first privately owned company to create comprehensive publicity campaigns for its products comparable to those used to promote imports, which I read not only as a consequence of the international art house circuit, but, more importantly, as an index of a growing internal interest in these narratives.²⁹

I have decided to play close attention to *El Callejón de los Milagros / Midaq Alley* for it represents the apex of its generation with its very rich texture³⁰ and complex narrative; but not only that, it reached a very wide audience--as did *Como agua para chocolate / Like Water for Chocolate* (Arau, 1990) and *Danzón*-- transcending the arthouse circuit and creating a genuine commercial run. Although certain explicit scenes kept the movie from being shown on television, it became and still remains widely available on video, in part thanks to the subsequent fame of Salma Hayek, who stars in *Midaq Alley*.

The lengthy film (146 minutes) is structured in four parts, each presented with an intertitle: Rutilio, Alma, Susanita and *El regreso* (The Return). The first three begin in the same point in time although they continue with a different perspective (and yes, this predates *Pulp Fiction* and, as doctor Cypess added in a private communication, is not quite *Rashomon*) centering on a character each; the fourth, offers closure to the parallel narratives. The importance of this mode of structuring is not so much its originality--it remains quite similar to Sergio Magaña's play *Los*

signos del zodiaco—as its effort to depict the whole community inhabiting Miracle Alley (the title in Spanish was not translated in order to make it easier for English-speaking audiences to relate the film back to Mahfouz's book) making every effort to leave the slumming inner city, and failing.

Although it could easily have been shot as a middle of the century melodrama—since most of the scenes are interiors, and the characters are not economically affluent, it would have been relatively easy to preserve the ambiguity—Vicente Leñero, the noted dramatist and novelist who wrote the script, and Jorge Fons decided otherwise: the diction is overtly contemporary, new cars appear several times, the young characters wear trendy--if cheap—clothes. There is no doubt this is Mexico City after the earthquake. Exterior shots are rare, but deterritorialization is avoided: actual *colonias* like Portales and the metro are mentioned throughout the film and the lexical choice is carefully taken from the sociolects of downtown Mexico City.

The visual-social agenda of *El Callejón de los Milagros* is informed by every forbidden thing in television: drug use, homosexuality, prostitution; but this is not gratuitous sensationalism, rather it is a very careful effort to cast the city that official discourse tried to force out of the imaginary. In this sense, the film is realistic to the same extent that *El Chavo del Ocho*'s schemata refuse in their static simplicity to portray inner city life. It could be argued that the different targeted audiences make all the difference. Yet, one must remember that Mexican film in the 70's created an urban subgenre of comedy. The archetypical protagonist of these films is Mauricio Garcés: a thirty-ish millionaire who lives in the luxurious, and then new, Pedregal de San Ángel, and whose main problem is unending popularity with women. The impoverished living spaces portrayed by Buñuel in *Los olvidados* were relegated to another subgenre: *el cine de ficheras* (hookers's films) that basically engaged audiences with seminudity and *albures* (dialogs with sexual play on words); in these films, there was never social commentary or mobility, and the visual texture had undergone the same kind of deterritorialization (though to a lesser extent) as in *El chavo del ocho*. The slums were sexual playgrounds and nothing else.

The new cinema was a veritable reterritorialization of the city, but this effort to explore more layers of life, resulted as well in a penetration that, as mentioned before, overlapped the usual educated and very small audiences interested in cult and artsy cinema, it enthralled the usual televisual crowd as well.

Now, our ultimate manner of reading these two representations of living space should be through their politics of location. How do these

represented living-spaces converse? Let me put it this way, while in both cases it seems almost impossible to abandon, the televisual *vecindad* is heaven (if a sucker's heaven) while the filmic one is hell. The fact that the gaze of *Midaq Alley* is directed precisely at the lair of *El Chavo del Ocho*, problematizes it. The sharp contrasts in representation of the very same living space date the television show, and force the audience to remember that the latter is a mask of a reality that is not only historical but that continues unsolved.

In *Midaq Alley*, social mobility, though arrested, is posed as desirable. Six characters leave the alley: one dead, two go to jail and return afterwards, one becomes an unhappy prostitute, two return from the United States with different fortunes: the poorer one returns to his family home married and with a child, the richer to meet his death in the elegant whorehouse where his girlfriend now lives.

Apparently, both film and television present the *vecindad* as one of the ultimate silencing machines. For, even though a lot of discursive activity is created within it, hardly any is deployed, this is to say, hardly anything of what is said, thought or planned within its walls, ever come to fruition, becomes part of the flux of the public, or creates social mobility for the people who inhabit the *vecindad*. Yet, the filmic rendition of this reality, rich and morally problematic, offers *itself* as the fruition of the struggle for life. The tragic ending of *Midaq Alley* replacing the complacent melodramatic reconfiguration of stable social niches, or the endless and comfortable repetition without a real intervention of time in *El chavo del ocho*, accuses the rest of the society, the ones outside the *vecindad* for the inhabitants of this world have done every effort available to their means to change their lives, to no avail.

In one scene for instance, Abel (Damian Bichir), the barber, climbs up Alma's (Salma Hayek) window to tell her a la Romeo and Juliet that he is about to leave for the United States. Chava, his best friend, has just beaten his father's lover, perhaps to death. Abel asks Alma to wait for him. "Just a year." Alma is hardly thrilled, but in the end she gives him a photograph, so that he'll be able to remember her. Abel asks "Are you going to wait for me?" Alma answers "All my life." Of course, soon enough she has a new fiancé and when don Fidel passes away unexpectedly she finds José Luis literally on the threshold of the wake.

What is intriguing about the competent job Hayek does portraying Alma's earnestness when she promises to wait for Abel, is how Alma seems, in fact, fated; she is permanently amazed at her own doings, yet quite unrepentant. There is next to no justification of her conduct, but she remains touching; and in the last scene of the film, the night when Abel

dies in her arms in the middle of an empty street lined with beautiful trees—which is the mirror-image of the dirty, crowded alley in the middle of the day that is the opening of the film—she inevitably invites deep compassion, not only for him but for herself as well, and, metonymically for all the fallen people of the Alley.

Midaq Alley is closer to melodrama, despite its tragic ending, than to high drama. This guarantees, at least in part, its great success. But, it is also a very intriguing piece of filmic material, extremely valiant and unflinching in its portraits of society (one of my recent students wrote “One of the things in the course I think I will never forget was the homosexual scene in *Midaq Alley*”).

I see Fons’ film as the last link of a structure of feeling that by 1994 was already mature and quite powerful, precisely the structure of feeling that resonated deeply when the economic crisis in December wrecked havoc on the real estate markets of formal economy³¹. Of course this chain of representations, that was constantly enacting “the return of the repressed”, this is, the ghost of impending menace over living space, became overtly dominant after 1994 for the crisis of housing had reached ample sectors of the middle and even well to do classes.

Conclusions

Of course to better understand 1994, and subsequently the 2000 elections, we must read back in time. Most authors agree in privileging the next bout of political malady as it were, the crisis in the financial markets of 1987, as the main cause of the close elections of 1988. Yet one must remember that as early as 1986, a critical group inside the PRI proclaimed its existence as the *corriente crítica* (critical trend) that would later reveal itself as far more populist-inclined than the corporatist government of de la Madrid. This faction separated itself from the PRI and with some parties of the scattered Left, formed the FDN (Frente Democrático Nacional: Democratic National Front), that later became the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática: Party of the Democratic Revolution). The 1988 election was so challenged that even after a failure of the computing system, the government prevented the opening of the ballot boxes, and in the end ordered them burned. (Cf. Garza 656-7). In the end, the candidate from the PRI, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, occupied the office from 1988 to 1994.

Salinas de Gortari basically continued the neo-liberal project initiated by Miguel de la Madrid. He signed the NAFTA (1991), sold a vast number of State-owned companies, reprivatized the banks (1993) but kept control over PEMEX (the sole oil-extracting corporation of the country)

and CFE (the sole electric power provider). At the same time he created a program-Solidaridad: Solidarity-of social help in order to make the transition to neo-liberal market capitalism less traumatic for the underprivileged. Some clear advances in democracy were permitted. In 1989, for the first time ever in modern Mexico, a state governor from the opposition took office.

Once again, the well being of the regime proved artificial. On January 1, 1994, the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional: Zapatista Army of National Liberation) revealed its existence by claiming a zone in the Lacandonian Jungle in the South-Pacific state of Chiapas as “territorio liberado” (liberated territory), and asked for a Indigenous Law granting special rights and privileges. The candidate of the PRI for the presidency, Luis Donaldo Colosio, and the secretary of the party Francisco Ruiz Massieu were assassinated in 1994. After the election was secured by the PRI and former secretary of education Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León had replaced Colosio, in what Hammet has characterized as the “lame duck period” president Salinas de Gortari announces a devaluation of the peso of close to 150% that wreaks havoc on the economic system and requires immediate help of nearly 50 billion dollars, mostly produced by the Clinton administration. This maneuver must be read of course as the moment when the hard press administration, no longer able to sustain the economic fiction, reveals publicly its consciousness and fear of the structure of feeling we have traced in the cinematic production of the post quake years.

Among the predominant notes of the Zedillo (1994-2000) *sexenio* (six year period in office) was an accentuated decomposition in the social fabric, although the economy showed signs of amelioration, always doubtful as the cycle of crises clearly show, it was not enough to deter violence and criminality in the urban areas or to create a peace agreement with the EZLN.

But this period will be remembered as the one leading to veritable democracy. For the first time the mayor of the capital was democratically chosen. The two elections (1997, 1999) were won by the PRD. The presidential election, however, was won by the candidate of the PAN, Vicente Fox Quesada, former governor of the central state of Guanajuato. Fox has proven to be a media president, a populist. With a clearly capitalistic career behind him-Fox was president of Coca Cola Latin America before he went into politics-he seems to personify the very same formulation that Basáñez signals as the foundational indecidable that is the birthmark of the PRI: corporative and populist at the same time.

At least in part—the internal conflicts of the PRD reaching public light, and their incapacity to profit politically from the government of

Mexico City are other good reasons-Fox's ability to incorporate living space into his discourse was responsible for his victory. In his discourse, Fox unflinchingly offered a future of extended prosperity, thanks to the democratic infection of entrepreneurship. He starts from the truism that (only) entrepreneurs (and tacitly politicians) eat properly, feel secure and have a roof over their heads, so the solution is not, as with the PRI, to enter the "great democratic family, nor, as with the PRD or worse the EZLN, to take from the rich even if it means using violence, the solution is rather, making an entrepreneur of every Mexican. His key word was the carefully chosen *changarro*, which rings comfortably both in the hearts of populists and of big corporations. *Changarro* is the term used to designate a small, family or even individually owned business, yet, the *changarro* is not the abstract financial entity, but actually the place where this venture is located. In most cases, the *changarro* is adjacent or even more likely part of the family living space. Thus, by a very subtle process of metonymy, Fox in effect jumped at the chance offered by the structures of feeling that come to the fore in the last fifteen years and redressed them as "capitalism starts at home."

Of course, much of the future of the regime will depend not only on the incumbent reorganization of the PRD and PRI, but on the generation of living-spaces, both actual and represented, that answer the needs of the country. Some of these questions depend on the international oil-price, or the success Fox might have in incorporating the territory and job-markets of the US (and Canada) as part of the space available for Mexicans. His pressure on George W. Bush prove that this is one of the most urgent points in his agenda. Meanwhile, the answer to his promises will remain in the hands of public opinion, which of course will find itself crystallizing, as always, in literature and film.

Notes

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¹ The use of the I is feared in Latin America as immodest. Yet, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and Raymond Williams's "Culture is Ordinary" proved exemplary to me, in that they founded perspectives unavailable to the so-called "objective" third person voice. I am also indebted with Meaghan Morris, for her analysis of the I in conversation with the national locus where it originates has reshaped my practice.

² Although it could be argued that the sphere of the public or public sphere exists as agora since the Greek, it has been subject to many formulations; from Engels to Habermas and beyond. I take it here to signify not the buffered space that characterized the interaction between Power and the people, as it does in Habermas reading of the Enlightenment, but rather as the situation created by the disappearance of that protection: the sphere of the public defines the places where the individual is subjected by the Power.

³ The term ideology was sharply analyzed by Raymond Williams in his 1977 *Marxism and Literature*, he came to the conclusion that at least three meanings were current, and this led to confusion. Sadly, Williams does not provide an alternative terminology.

I will refer to ideology in the tradition that stems from Althusser as read and critiqued by Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where he characterizes our 'post-ideological' climate as the ultimate delusion produced for effectively hailing us to a subject position. This is to say, that ideology first and foremost creates the illusion of its extinction in order to function.

⁴ The soundscape of the house, created by radios, recorded music and oftentimes unwatched televisions is also part of the hegemonic wedge, yet, it is primarily one of inviting selected elements exteriority to the house and keeping the sounds of the real vicinity absent.

⁵ In the 'lost decade' (the term comes from the analysis and prediction by CEPAL) of the 80's the only industry that showed a positive development in Latin America was that of communication media.

⁶ Of the 16 million Mexican households more than 13 million have a television set. Interestingly enough, during the same period of time, the number of movie-theaters and the overall attendance have dwindled.

⁷ For a discussion of television as a source of private experience in social experiences, and also of its double role as a window towards the sphere of the public while confining the viewer to remain in the private space of the living space. See Lynn Spigel. *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001 (esp. 32-59). Spigel uses the term electric space for all that which is televisually mediated.

⁸ For the best analysis see Basáñez 94-116

⁹ See the following quote for a good illustration of the process:

During the night of 3-4 September 1971, a call went up in the southern outskirts of Mexico City: '¡Hay tierra!' [There's land!]" Within a twenty-four-hour period, four to five thousand families, some twenty thousand people in all, 'parachuted' into the sparsely inhabited area known as Colonia Santo Domingo. It stands as the largest single land invasion in the history of Latin America.

Mexico's president, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, proved the unintentional instigator when, on 1 September 1971, he declared his intent to respect the rights of all Mexicans to decent houses, called attention to the need to legalize de facto tenancy on public lands, and emphasized the obligation of the government to support those living in the worse conditions. (Gutmann 33)

¹⁰ A survey revealed, in 1996-1997 that between 25 and 28% of the population of Mexico City had been victims of a crime. Only a third reported it to the police. (Reforma-BIMSA)

¹¹ We can consider my tiny textual contribution in homology with the kind of silence illustrated by Aijaz Ahmad in the *Social Text* issue of Fall 1986: "The remarkable thing about all the major Urdu prose narratives which were written during the half century in which the British completed their conquest of India is that there is nothing in their contents, in their way of seeing the world, which can reasonably be connected with the colonial onslaught or with any sense of resistance to it." (18)

¹² That is, the Name of the Father.

¹³ This seems to explain, as well, the economic and econometric urgency of recent historiography.

¹⁴ In an instant every given is crushed. An inexorable landscape replaces the previous one. Rubble, seas of rubble, steel foundations, desolation is this sea of meaningless objects, of buildings like huge wounded or dying beasts ... Tears take the place of lack of understanding. Awe displaces tears. In the livid faces questions vanish unasked. Pain assimilates the incomprehensibility of it all. But through that which remains incomprehensible the sense of the tragedy sinks in.

¹⁵ The sudden revelation of these powers adds a new ethical and civil space to the capital, one that openly confronts the assumptions of the paternalistic State, which never recognizes that its pupils are no longer minors.

¹⁶ In fact, the decade of 1960 is decisive for the multifocalization of the city, for it is also during these years that the only full-blown attempt to build a suburb is undertaken and when the first line of the Metro (subway) is completed. The history of the latter remains quite illustrative of the modes and manners of the building industry in Mexico:

The idea of a subway had been kicked around since the days of Alemán [Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-1952)], but the unstable subsoil with its high water content dissuaded all but the most visionary advocates. Mayor Ernesto Uruchurtu, loyal to middle class that generally resented the growth of their city and the loss of colonial charm stubbornly opposed the idea. Into the center of the debate, however, came the powerful engineering and construction firm Ingenieros Civiles Asociados (Associated Civil Engineers, or ICA). A huge conglomerate, vertically integrated and heavily vested in Mexico City real estate, the ICA recognized the windfall profits it could reap through the project. And it had friends in high places. Carlos Abedro[p] Dávila, president of the chamber of commerce, was a member of its board, and Ángel and Gilberto Borja de Navarrete were among its founders. A Borja de Navarrete daughter was married to Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, México's president since 1964.

Not surprisingly, Díaz Ordaz became one of the most outspoken supporters of the Metro, as the subway was called. He apparently helped orchestrate a prolonged bus strike in 1965-66 that greatly aggravated tensions in the capital and dismissed longtime opponent Uruchurtu in its wake. To no one's real surprise, the ICA won the contract for the undertaking after its final approval. Cost overruns and the need to import expensive foreign technology complicated the Metro's construction, but the physical accomplishment cannot be denied. By 1968, Mexico City had a state-of-the-art subway, with its sleek trains seeding visitors in and out of downtown that summer's Olympic Games. [...]

Unfortunately, working-class poor from eastside barrio such as Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl did not completely benefit from the subway. Although subsidized fares were low, the lack of a direct line to the northern industrial parks complicated the commute to those areas. [...] Within months of its opening the Metro was overburdened with crowds pushing the system to the breaking point. (Sherman 596-7)

¹⁷ 15.5% of the living space was totalled; 72.2% partially affected; 11% unaffected. Obviously, in 53.9% of the living space that disappeared the tenants paid less than 500 pesos per month, while in the less damaged the rent was more than 15,000 pesos.... Thousands resist relocation to the official temporary housing. They prefer the overcrowded streets and parks.... Whatever it takes to remain close to their old houses.

¹⁸ If your house is about to fall, stay on the street. Do not leave the neighborhood.

¹⁹ Confidence in the self-organized processes grows, and the authorities resent that On Monday [September] the 23rd, the government emits the consign: *normalization*, which means a return to the formulas of unconditional obedience....

The rejection to "normalization" is led by the human toll of the catastrophe. How much were deficient buildings, fruits of greed, to blame for the tragedy?.... Government employees adulate alternatively and simultaneously the *people, youth, civil society, solidarity*, but anti-government resentment suspends credibility and makes it extremely difficult to undertake "normalization".

²⁰ You were talking the other day about seizing powers, not the big seizure of Power, with Bastille and all, but a seizure that means accepting as well the obligations with the democratic rights. See now the seizure of nothingness that we are offered: You did very good, wear this

good-conduct medal on your lapel and go home. My father, for instance, from Thursday the 19th to Sunday the 22nd saw me as a hero on TV, but then he changed; enough, young man, chill out, what is there to be won clowning around with that red ribbon and a surgical mask. Pipe down, you are not bringing anybody back to life; what you should do is study to grab a good job. And sure, my mother told me that on TV they say the city is back to normal, everybody happy about being sad, let the dead bury the dead, and let the Mayor head the big Reconstruction. You know what? Not me.

²¹ Yes, I am happy. Houses will change for the better. New, what a difference! Just take a look at our living conditions. I had already asked my husband to look for another place, because frankly this surroundings are not good for my sons.

²² I have nothing to complain about. My little house has every convenience. My husband is regaining his health; he has almost quit drinking and he brought me a tablecloth, orange comforters and a tumbler. He says we will begin again, but who knows.

²³ I have nothing to criticize. People from the opposition parties have come to propose us things and we send them to hell, not because we love the PRI, but because we see what the government is doing and we recognize it as good, so we won't cause any trouble.

--Do you think in the new houses you will be able to continue having the order of the refuge?

--Of course! Our organization will carry on; we will have a directing-board to keep it up. We have even told the Marías (female hawkers) that they can paint their houses any way they want, like their ribbons; and that inside they can do whatever they want but outside we must respect each other.

²⁴ This is what was on television a week before the earthquake (9/11/1985):

-On the government-owned channel 13: *Webster* was playing at 7:30 pm, followed by a half-hour documentary about John Le Carré, and a soccer game at 8:30.

-On the privately²⁴ owned channel 2 (the one with top ratings): *Qué lío con este trío* (What a mess with these trio) a locally produced comedy show at 8 pm, *Salón de belleza* (Beauty parlor) ditto at 8:30, *Nuevas noches* (New nights) basically centered around the conductress interviews and some live performances, with the format of Unitedstatian late night shows.

-Channel 4 (Televisa) was basically playing vintage shows, such as *Combat* at 9 pm and sports, it broadcasted the Dodgers game--with Fernando Valenzuela as the main attraction--at 10 pm.

-Channel 5 (Televisa) *Disneylandia* Disney hour long including films in two parts and short animations) at 8 pm, and *Trapper John MD* at 9.

-Channel 9 (Televisa) *Contrapunto* (Counterpoint) with Mexico's top anchor Jacobo Zabudovsky attempting in-depth analysis of different subjects in between *60-minutes* and expert-panel show followed by *México a través de su historia* (Mexico through history) a long multi-themed documentary block.

A day after the earthquake (9/20/1985), the programs included three local sitcoms, *The Whiz Kids*, *Blue Thunder*, *The Adams Family*, *The Untouchables*, and, in channel 9 the same as the week before.

Seven days after the earthquake (9/26/1985), when the newspapers were already publishing a map of alternative routes in downtown Mexico, the programs remain unchanged. That day two movies are programmed: *The Godfather* and *No matarás* (Thou shalt not kill), a Mexican melodrama.

It is of course easier to substitute a show than a serial, and if the former were not replaced, *telenovelas* (soap-operas) remained absolutely undisturbed, reigning supreme all afternoon until seven and then, again, from 9 pm.

²⁵ Although no longer made, it is still broadcast. Interestingly the shows selected for this umpteenth season are precisely those centered around El Chavo del Ocho, instead of the more recent ones, where several characters such as El Chapulín Colorado (The red grasshopper: a stupid superhero) alternated in the electric space.

²⁶ I use both this term and reterritorialization in the sense that Gilles Deleuze gave them, for instance in his essay "On the Line" (cf. Deleuze 232,3). This is to say, deterritorialization is the

action of depriving a thing of its usual function --and in this case, representation-- to, in reterritorialization, assign it a new one. I chose these terms because they reaffirm the relationship between use and topography, between representation and space.

²⁷ In *Ciudad de ciegos* (Cortés 1991) ten stories revolve around the life in, and deterioration of a single apartment in Mexico City's downtown, using it as a synecdoche of the imaginary unifocal city.

Danzón (Novaro, 1991) revolves around non-matrimonial happiness achieved through the sexy but not sexual—or coital--rhythmic-rituals of middle of the century Mexico City: nostalgia re-enacted in the same *salones* (dance-halls) that, of course, mark the geography of earthquake-damaged neighborhoods.

Principio y fin / Beginning and End (Ripstein, 1994) and *El Callejón de los Milagros / Midaq Alley* (Fons, 1995) are both based, rather faithfully, on homonymous novels by Nuhagib Mafouz about turn of the century Cairo, but with the old downtown used as much more than a backdrop: first of all it is realistically depicted, and secondly it acts powerfully in conversation with the antimodern practices of deviants, small time crooks and dysfunctional families.

²⁸ In a personal communication. Ignacio Durán Loera, Imcine's director during this period, estimated that only around 20% of the films he produced made money, while 20% break even, and the rest created losses.

²⁹ The first films produced by Altavista successfully recovered their budgets solely from domestic exhibition.

³⁰ The narrative of the novel has been significantly modified for the film. The script was published by El Milagro, México.

³¹³¹ I have described above the difference between formal --middle and higher class-- markets and the popular sector of real estate.

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