

THE POLITICS OF MEXICAN DOCUMENTARY DISTRIBUTION:

THREE CASE STUDIES, 1988-2006

By

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Manuel Antonio Pérez Tejada Domínguez

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Committee members	Tamara Falicov	_____
		Chairperson
	Charles Berg	_____
	Catherine Preston	_____
	John Tibbetts	_____
	Danny Anderson	_____

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The Dissertation Committee for Manuel Antonio Pérez Tejada Domínguez certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Chairperson

Charles Berg \_\_\_\_\_

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John Tibbetts \_\_\_\_\_

Danny Anderson \_\_\_\_\_

Date Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the politics involved in the distribution of Mexican documentaries during the 1988-2006 period, as a way to pinpoint the factors shaping the circulation of these films. The research explores inequalities in audiovisual distribution, which have affected the circulation of Mexican documentaries in the domestic market. In my argument, I sustain that these inequalities are the result of complex political and economic tensions within the field of cultural production in a country that has entered an era of neoliberalism and transitional democracy. To narrow the scope of this study to feasible and attainable proportions, I analyze three distribution case studies applying a cultural industries approach within critical political economy, informed by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and concepts borrowed from cultural studies.

The case studies under analysis involved the documentary production and distribution of three production houses. Each of them participates in a different field of cultural production: film, video, or television. These production houses are the film company La Media Luna, the video collective Canal 6 de Julio, and the publishing and video company Clío. By examining these case studies, I highlight what is at stake when some audiovisual texts have greater access to audiences and markets than others. This is important since documentaries have helped to ensure a diversity of voices, both social and political, in the Mexican public sphere. In order to ensure this diversity, it is crucial to understand how Mexican documentaries can gain access to larger Mexican audiences. This is what this dissertation seeks to address.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Mexican documentaries have rarely appeared on movie theatre screens, in video releases, or even on public television within their own territory's distribution circuits. It is well known that documentaries around the world receive limited distribution. Traditionally, academics have explained this circumstance based on the arguably noncommercial status of the documentary genre. Bill Nichols notes that a circuit of documentary distribution works tangentially to the commercial one, either duplicating it or operating in a less commercial form (Representing 15). According to this argument, this occurs because documentaries only appeal to specialized audiences or because their political content becomes problematic for commercial distribution. I believe these assumptions demand further study in order to analyze more in detail why this scarcity in documentary distribution occurs, since the argument has become almost formulaic with no regard for differences in markets, historical contexts and documentaries. Nationally, the limited distribution of Mexican documentaries is a political, economic, and cultural issue. It is possible to trace how these dimensions of the problem have affected, in very particular manners, the distribution of Mexican documentaries in different historical periods. This is a way to initiate a discussion about how distributors give preference to some audiovisual texts over others, making an impact on the repertoire of texts that audiences have available to make sense of their everyday life, that is, as part of the meaning making processes that produce culture.

After a strong presence during the early era of Mexican cinema, the production and distribution of Mexican documentaries started to diminish in the 1920s due to a lack of government support and Hollywood's dominance over distribution circuits. Later, during the so-called golden age of Mexican cinema, documentaries only played a minor role. In the

1960s, efforts to spark documentary production clashed with political repression, which confined some documentaries to clandestine circuits. Thereafter, the co-opted state film industry of the 1970s and 1980s, while increasing documentary production, achieved little progress in terms of expanding distribution outside alternative circuits. In this study, I will examine the 1988-2006 period since tensions between economic and cultural aspects of audiovisual production and distribution have intensified during these years.

During the 1988-2006 period, audiovisual industries in Mexico faced changes in media policies that mirrored political and economic trends such as neoliberalism. In 1989, faced with the lack of distributors' interest in documentaries, filmmakers created alternative distribution channels amidst political turmoil (Mendoza "Canal 6" 55; Rovirosa 2: 101). In the mid 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and ensuing neoliberal media policies sparked the renovation of movie theatres and the birth of a public TV channel (Rosas Mantecón 12). Yet, national and transnational media corporations continued to dominate most audiovisual outlets (García Canclini Consumers 114).

At the turn of the century, more Mexican documentaries received theatrical distribution than in previous decades. However, their circulation remained limited when compared to the volume of distribution of other audiovisual products. Relegated to the margins, documentaries have mostly circulated through film festivals, art house circuits, or special screenings. In 2003, distributors overlooked Marcela Arteaga's *Recuerdos* (*Remembrance*, 2003), an award-winning documentary about Jewish immigrants during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. These distributors described the artistic qualities of this film as problematic for commercial distribution (Arteaga Email). This context demands further research. The present analysis of specific case studies of documentary distribution will investigate the impact of political and economic factors on distribution.

This research study will examine three case studies of documentary distribution during the 1988-2006 period to pinpoint the factors shaping the circulation of Mexican documentaries. By examining these case studies, I will highlight what is at stake when some audiovisual texts have greater access to audiences and markets than others. This is important since documentaries have helped to ensure a diversity of voices, both social and political, in the Mexican public sphere. In order to ensure this diversity, it is crucial to understand how Mexican documentaries can gain access to larger Mexican audiences. This is what this dissertation seeks to address.

This study focuses on inequalities in the distribution of a marginalized film form, the documentary genre. The research explores how these inequalities have affected the circulation of Mexican documentaries in the domestic market. This may be the result of complex political and economic tensions within the field of cultural production in a country that has entered an era of neoliberalism and transitional democracy. Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices, which sustains that human well-being is best served by an unregulated free market, thus, favoring free trade and minimal government intervention in societies (Hesmondhalgh Cultural Industries 86, 312). In the end, as in previous decades, Mexican documentary distribution remains limited, as these documentaries continue to circulate at the margins of an audiovisual field that favors fictional and foreign products. In an analysis of Mexican cinema in the 1990s, Néstor García Canclini asks, “What happens to national cultures when television, video and related media are in the hands of those with commercial and transnational objectives?” (“Will There Be” 249-50).

In line with this critical question, I will analyze how global and local distribution trends affect what is available in the Mexican audiovisual market. It is vital to pose questions such as who has access to documentary distribution in this country. Why do not independent



filmmakers in Mexico have the opportunity to screen their documentaries on public television? What happens when public television prefers to co-produce documentaries with the Discovery Channel instead of acquiring Mexican documentary productions?

Recently, film scholar Lynn A. Higgins discussed the sudden surge of documentaries in mainstream movie theatres and their notoriety in the press, specifically in the United States. Higgins asks, “Why has this neglected genre (or cluster of genres) moved out of the art houses and college campuses and into the mainstream?” (21). In her findings, Higgins mentions the affordability of videography, the democratization of new technologies, and an *auterish* and defiant documentary, which is personal and controversial (22-23). It is possible to add to these factors the segmentation of the market place. However, those factors mostly answer for the increasing number of documentaries produced, but they do not explain distribution problems that bar the circulation of most of these films. Moreover, Mexico presents a specific historical context in which political and economic barriers hamper the distribution of national documentaries. The democratization of new technologies is a difficult project to fulfill when in Mexico half of the population lives in poverty<sup>1</sup>(Poverty).

Key to this research is to understand what factors set limitations on documentary distribution in Mexico. It is important to comprehend what impact constraining factors have on the circulation of audiovisual content discussing issues related to culture, identities, or democracy among others. By using data drawn from the media industries and official institutions such as IMCINE<sup>2</sup>, I will assess to what extent the distribution of Mexican documentaries is limited in comparison to other film, video, and TV programming. Based on interviews, trade publications, and the analysis of media policies and industry practices, I will

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<sup>1</sup> Source: World Bank. Poverty in Mexico: An Assessment of Trends, Conditions, and Government Strategy. The World Bank, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía or Mexican Film Institute.

identify what factors, local or global, affect the national circulation of Mexican documentaries. By examining three distribution case studies, I will narrow the scope of this study to feasible and attainable proportions. Within a theoretical framework based on the cultural industries approach, within critical political economy, and informed by some components of cultural studies, I will analyze how local or global factors affect documentary distribution within the fields of audiovisual production, film, television and video, in Mexico.

In this research, I will analyze industry practices, media policies, new technologies, and the discourses, or series of statements, that define what a documentary is. While business practices and censorship appear to be some of the causes for the limited circulation of Mexican documentaries, discourses about the documentary, such as misconceptions on the genre, should not be overlooked. These discourses could undermine the commercial viability of these works. Moreover, these discourses work in tandem with other media industry practices that have historically ignored documentaries for theatrical, television or video release. Therefore, intentionally or not, distributors and other cultural intermediaries may engage in the particular discourses that support their own interests, marginalizing this genre.

## **Relevance**

This study makes five main contributions to film and media studies. First, this research contributes to the scarce literature on Mexican documentaries. On a second level, this study combines approaches not usually applied together in studies of documentary films. Those approaches include political economy, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, and cultural studies. On a third level, this study continues a discussion on issues of film distribution that Miguel Contreras Torres started in his famous book, *El Libro Negro del Cine Mexicano (The Black Book of Mexican Cinema, 1960)*. However, the present research is a fresh and close

look at contemporary audiovisual industry practices. This study also reveals how the Mexican documentary has diversified its forms. Finally, I hope this study brings to the fore discussions on the limited distribution of Mexican documentaries in Mexico by spelling out the politics of industrial practices that deter their circulation.

### **Historical background**

In this study, the 1988-2006 historical period of Mexican documentary production and distribution covers a moment of political and economic transition in Mexican history that became exacerbated by global trends such as neoliberalism and the demise of the socialist bloc. By 1988, Mexico's political regime had operated during 59 years as a virtual one-party system. During those years, the hegemonic and authoritarian Partido Revolucionario Institucional (the Institutional Revolutionary Party), the PRI party, had concentrated political and economic power producing enormous inequalities in all aspects of the life of this nation: political, economic, social, and cultural (Cornelius 87; Gawronski 293, 308). In 2000, the PRI party would finally lose the presidency after several decades of its decaying power. The violent repression of social movements during the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s along with a series economic crisis during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, progressively heightened tensions in the political environment. These tensions became evident by mid 1980s with signs of social unrest and political pressure.

Following neoliberal economic trends as the ones implemented by Ronald Reagan's government in the 1980s, the Miguel de la Madrid administration (1982-1988) initiated a shift from a mixed economic system in Mexico toward a neoliberal model as a way to respond to the 1982 economic crisis (Cornelius 93, 110; Gawronski 291-92). The role of the state in the economy was reduced. The Carlos Salinas administration (1988-1994) accelerated

these processes, including privatizations in the film and television industries, in preparation to the signature of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, in 1994 (Sarnstad 5; Lozano 468). That year, while the Zapatista movement in Chiapas became a reminder of the enormous disparities in Mexico, a series of political assassinations emphatically signaled the deterioration of the political system.

Salinas reached the presidency in 1988 among allegations of fraud. The PRI had started to lose state governor elections during his presidency. Local and international pressure toward democratization was mounting over the Mexican government as this country had embraced neoliberal reforms, entered international trade agreements, lost legitimacy and credibility, and failed to resolve social inequalities (Sarnstad 6-9; Gawronski 319). These factors contributed to a PRI party willing to make political concessions. During 1996, Mexican political parties accorded to implement an electoral reform creating an electoral institution which was autonomous from governmental control. As a consequence of these changes, the PRI party lost the congressional majority in the 1997 federal election. In 2000, Vicente Fox, the candidate of the right-wing party Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party), would win the presidential election. However, the neoliberal model would remain in place during the following six years and beyond.

### **Background of problem**

In recent years, authors and filmmakers have expressed concerns about local film distribution in general and about documentary distribution, including film, TV and video, in particular. For instance, from 1986 to 1989, the late José Rovirosa, a prominent documentary filmmaker and professor, conducted interviews with some of the most important documentary filmmakers in Mexico at that time. These interviews appeared in *Miradas a la Realidad*

(*Looks to Reality*, 1990-1992), a two-volume work. In those interviews, filmmakers addressed the following concerns: (1) the sense that the documentary form was struggling to survive; (2) the notion that distributors and viewers were not interested in this genre; (3) the fact that not even the filmmakers had seen the works produced by their colleagues and (4) a continuing debate around how adequate and feasible television, public or commercial, was as a documentary outlet. At the end of 2006, the state of the Mexican documentary as described by these scholars and filmmakers seems to remain the same.

A limited distribution of national documentaries, a body of film that often represents in a critical manner a Mexican reality, translates into a lack of diversity in the repertoire of genres, and points of view available to the public through audiovisual content. The circumstances that stem from power struggles and industry practices – driven mostly, but not exclusively, by economic profit - favor the distribution of contents that are more acceptable and less controversial within mainstream society while marginalizing those with more critical content. Therefore, audiences participating in the public sphere in Mexico will not be exposed to viewpoints in debates on social and political issues. This situation will have an impact on the decision-making process at different levels of society regarding democracy (Hesmondhalgh Cultural Industries 23). However, this problem is not new. One of its clearer antecedents covers a period from 1968 to 1987. From a body of documentaries produced from the 1960s to the mid 1980s, only a few, such as Leobardo López's *El Grito* (*The Shout*, 1970) and Nicolás Echevarría's *María Sabina: Mujer Espiritu* (*María Sabina: Spirit Woman*, 1979), reached either video distribution or limited theatrical release.

At the end of the 1960s, many critical social documentaries were produced as part of a social movement that President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's authoritarian regime crushed in what is now known as the *Massacre of Tlatelolco*. Even if death toll figures are in dispute,

prominent authors and academics have stated that the Mexican government killed hundreds of civilians after a non-violent rally on October 2 a few days prior to the 1968 Olympic Games inaugural ceremony (Paz 94; Maciel 200). From the mid 1960s to the first years of the 1970s, fearing state censorship, documentary filmmakers circumscribed the circulation of films such as *El Grito* to private or clandestine screenings. By 2004, *El Grito* was still the only documentary available on video from that period.

During the Luis Echeverría administration (1970-1976), documentaries remained at the margins of commercial circuits even after a media openness policy (also called the democratic aperture) was launched. This democratic aperture could have promulgated a wider circulation of documentaries through commercial channels since the government under President Luis Echeverría built a vertically integrated state film industry that controlled an important segment of commercial distribution and founded a state-owned TV network, Canal 13. However, as David Maciel argues, this policy of media openness was merely an attempt to relieve social pressure from the government while the State still kept tight control on content (201). Even though documentary production reached a peak during this period, they were rarely released through commercial distribution (Pérez Turrent Documental 10-11). Art houses, university circuits, and alternative venues became the most important exhibition outlets of an independent documentary film movement (Tello and Reygadas 74). With the State co-opting the film industry, there was little space left for independent filmmakers. As long as these filmmakers were overtly political in tone, they could not obtain commercial distribution under the Echeverría regime.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an arguably open media environment was conducive to documentary production, but politics and bureaucracy constrained their circulation again. During those years, state institutions acted as the main documentary

producers. The Centro de Producción de Cortometrajes (Short Film Production Center or CPC) was a prominent production unit among others. However, these entities turned out to be more of a hindrance than help for documentary distribution. A large volume of this production only served to promote State programs and policies (Tello and Reygadas 77). Many critical works did not make it into commercial distribution. In addition, State film units and public TV stations had to face the reinvention of media policies from one administration to the next one.

These discontinuities have affected documentary distribution. For instance, while working within the CPC in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Nicolás Echevarría made two important documentaries that were some of the few that played in the state-owned movie theater chain COTSA<sup>3</sup>: *María Sabina, Mujer Espiritu* and *El Niño Fidencio: El Taumaturgo del Espinazo* (*Child Fidencio, Healer of Espinazo*, 1981). However, the government divested this film unit, taking with it the copyrights of these works. This made their television and video distribution a bureaucratic hurdle.

It was not until 2003 that some institutions and private initiatives began to distribute some of these films on VHS and DVD formats. For instance, the National University's film archive, Filmoteca de la UNAM, released *El Grito* in 2003. IMCINE, released Nicolás Echevarría's documentaries in a special DVD collection in 2005. Oscar Menéndez distributed through his own efforts his documentary *Historia de un Documento* (*History of a Document*, 1968) in 2004. However, by the end of 2006, some of the documentaries that did not reach commercial distribution during the 1968-1988 period are still unavailable on video and hardly ever broadcast on television. Among them are Paul Leduc's *Etnocidio: Notas sobre El Mezquital* (*Ethnocide: Notes on El Mezquital*, 1976) co-produced by Canada and Mexico's

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<sup>3</sup> Compañía Operadora de Teatros (Operating Theatre Company)

Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP or Mexico's Department of Education), and Eduardo Maldonado's *Jornaleros* (*Day laborers*, 1977), also co-produced by Canada and Mexico's SEP and CPC.

Since 1988, social unrest, neoliberal trends, cultural policies, video technologies, and new cultural distribution channels have factored in the increasing, though still limited, number of Mexican documentaries that have found commercial distribution. These factors are constantly interacting and, often, colliding. Within the context of electoral fraud, government repression, and social marginalization, filmmakers and activists have taken advantage of the attributes of video technologies, affordability and reproducibility, to denounce social injustice. In addition, the expansion of bookstore franchises and the Internet developed new distribution channels for these video documentaries. However, documentary filmmakers still face numerous hurdles to reach commercial distribution for their works.

Neoliberal economic policies enacted by the Carlos Salinas administration stimulated the modernization and expansion of movie theatres, but not domestic film production. To compensate the decline in national film production, film policies funded national production. They also mandated the theatrical release of all national films, but without making a distinction between commercial and cultural theatrical circuits. These measures ushered a few Mexican documentaries into commercial theatrical distribution.

Neoliberal economic measures also privatized the state-owned TV company Imevisión, thus, breaking up the private television monopoly held for decades by media giant Televisa. In this context, a historical documentary series even reached the commercial broadcast television airwaves as a result of the reconfiguration of political forces and new competition in the television field during the 1990s. However, those documentaries that have achieved commercial distribution are exceptional cases. Documentary distribution is still



constrained by, first, economic barriers and, second, political censorship. Therefore, it is needed to examine the complex interaction of factors that bar these national films.

The meager circulation of Mexican documentaries is reflected in a similar scarcity of academic film research focusing on this problem. In general, the attention paid to documentaries within the Mexican audiovisual fields (cinema, video, and television) is minimal in film and media studies. While some authors such as Carl J. Mora have considered the relevance of documentaries in their accounts of this national cinema, they have only referred briefly to these audiovisual works (Mexican Cinema 113). Most of those references are piecemeal, appearing in newspaper articles, essays, and anthologies. Film critics and scholars typically study Mexican documentaries in a succinct manner and without discussing distribution issues, such as when Michael Chanan examines Eduardo Maldonado's approach to documentary filmmaking ("Rediscovering Documentary: Cultural Context and Intentionality" 40). Although these studies are extremely valuable for bringing attention to these relevant documentaries, none of them problematizes their limited distribution. My research, conversely, focuses on documentaries which have found an audience, however limited, as a way to identify barriers and opportunities in the distribution of Mexican documentaries.

### **Case studies**

The selection of these case studies was based on the following criteria. This research centers on three case studies during the 1988-2006 period. Each case study focuses on a production unit led by Mexican producers. Since its foundation, each unit has continued to sustain a documentary production that reaches a considerable audience with respect to other documentary production efforts. This is an important characteristic to identify what factors

have made possible the distribution of these documentaries. In addition, the documentary production of each unit chiefly focuses on Mexican issues with a human subject. They are political, social, historical, and artistic documentaries. Here, I do not intend to promote a nationalistic perspective on documentary production, but to identify under what conditions certain types of documentaries are able to participate in the discussions and representations of Mexico. One of my goals is to discuss how documentary production could still be a viable site of media production to diversify the discussions and debates about Mexico as a nation-state. Scientific or wild life documentaries without a social context involved would not serve that goal.

There are extremely relevant documentaries to discuss the effects of global trends on Mexican documentary production such as Carlos Marcovich's *¿Quién Diablos es Juliette?* (*Who the Hell is Juliette?*, 1996). In this documentary, Argentine-Mexican filmmaker Marcovich follows a charismatic sixteen-year old Cuban girl, Juliette, in Havana, Cuba, and Mexico City. While I do refer to this documentary later, it is not the focus of this research. This type of documentaries with a transnational scope obliquely looks at Mexico as a nation. Their foci mostly remain outside Mexican territory, imagined or tangible. While these documentaries may be indicative of the many concerns Mexican documentary filmmakers have, they are not conducive toward a discussion on the challenges in documentary distribution for those documentaries that intend to advance to the front Mexican issues and represent aspects of this country and its society.

In an attempt to cover different modes of production and distribution, each case study involves one mode of production and one distribution format. Thus, one case study involves the documentary filmmaker Juan Carlos Rulfo and his independent production house La Media Luna in their quest for the theatrical distribution of two multi-awarded artistic

documentary films, *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo (I Forgot, I Don't Remember, 1997)* and *En el Hoyo (In the Pit, 2005)*. The second case focuses on the distribution of social and political documentaries produced by the video collective Canal 6 de Julio and its strategies to circumvent official censorship. The last case study centers on the made-for-television historical documentary series *México Siglo XX (Mexico Twentieth Century)*, later renamed *México Nuevo Siglo (New Century Mexico)*, produced by the commercial publishing and production house, Editorial Clío, and broadcast on the commercial TV network, Televisa.

In chapter 2, I examine La Media Luna's documentaries as a case study to explain the conditions in which these two documentary films found theatrical distribution in a highly competitive distribution circuit. My attention centers on the strategies deployed by Rulfo and La Media Luna to overcome distribution barriers. In addition, my analysis contrasts the distribution of these documentaries against those that did not garner a theatrical release.

The case studies of Canal 6 de Julio, a collective of documentary filmmakers, and the documentary TV series *Mexico Siglo XX*, in chapters 3 and 4, are contrasting modes of production, and thus, key to this research. *Canal 6 de Julio* is a grassroots form of production while *México Siglo XX* has ties to Televisa's media conglomerate. Each case is individually analyzed, but both are examples of documentary distribution that appears at first completely operating outside the realm of state support and subsidies. However, a closer look will reveal tensions and contradictions as the state-owned bookstore franchise Educadistributes Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries, and *México Siglo XX* counts among its TV sponsors governmental institutions. These three case studies will be analyzed with the help of a theoretical framework, and within the context of prior research and literature review of Mexican and Latin American documentaries.

## **Methodology**

Within a cultural industries approach informed by cultural studies, this dissertation applies the concepts of the field of cultural production to an analysis of the politics in the distribution of Mexican documentaries in Mexico during 1988-2006. By paying attention to distribution practices in the fields of film, video and television production, I will examine the political and economic structures and processes that take place within the Mexican cultural industries landscape whereby some audiovisual works are circulated more widely than others. In specific, I want to identify how documentaries enter, or become discarded, in the processes of audiovisual distribution in Mexico. Cultural industries are sites of power struggles where the ambiguous commodification of cultural production takes place. This research analyzes those tensions and contradictions to identify how factors such as media policies, new technologies and political, cultural and financial interests permeate the decision-making processes of those individuals involved in audiovisual distribution. I expect to identify how the agencies of cultural intermediaries, state officials, and filmmakers play a role in those processes.

This dissertation focuses on three case studies of documentary distribution, one for each field, film, video and television. One part of my research is based on interviews with filmmakers, distributors, media executives, and state officials. Another part is derived from research in Mexican film archives and newspaper libraries. Through that research work, I have compiled numerous data about the Mexican film industry as well as relevant statements about documentary distribution from filmmakers, distributors and film officials.

## **Cultural industries**

The concept “the cultural industries” stems from a concern about the homogenization of cultural production and the contradictions in the mass commodification of culture. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their seminal essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944) originally used the singular term “The Culture Industry” to bring attention to the contradictions in the processes of commodification and massification of culture in the 1940s. They saw in the standardization of mass produced culture (i.e. film, radio, music, or magazines), dominated by monopolies in control of technologies, that is, “the totality of culture industry”, the end of free and critical expression, which was found in high art (Horkheimer and Adorno 121). For these Frankfurt School authors, the industrialization of culture in mass media meant the continuous reproduction of the same formulas, which were also homogenizing society and human minds. Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay shows an elitist tone in their argument idealizing the free and democratic values of high art over popular culture, and putting an emphasis on the notion of a dominant ideology. However, through the term Culture Industry, these scholars appropriately underscored the tensions and contradictions in the commodification of cultural texts.

As mass media expanded, other authors discussed Horkheimer and Adorno’s ideas as the social and political implications in the intersection of culture and economics became more prominent. Bernard Miège rejected Horkheimer and Adorno’s attachment to artistic creation, and pluralized “The Culture Industry” term to identify a range of industries with different modes of productions, and power struggle dynamics, thus, highlighting a more complex panorama in cultural production (9-11). Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of cultural production also provided other authors such as Nicholas Garnham, and institutions, such as

UNESCO, with the preliminary foundations for developing academic approaches and debates centered on cultural industries.

Nicholas Garnham made a major contribution to the study of cultural industries as he identified and described key characteristics in these industries and their products, which help to explain the complexity and ambivalence in industrialized cultural production. His seminal book *Capitalism and Communication* (1990), a collection of essays, follows a critical political economy approach to discuss cultural and media studies. At odds with neoclassical economics, Garnham undertakes a study of cultural industries and cultural production using a Marxist analysis. This involves a study of capitalism by looking at the practices that create, distribute, and appropriate symbolic forms and at the connection between the social system and the ideas developed in society (Capitalism 5). In his essay *Public Policy and the Cultural Industries*, Garnham defines cultural industries as:

“... those institutions in our society which employ the characteristic modes of production and organization of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the form of cultural goods and services, generally, although not exclusively as commodities.” (Capitalism 156)

Garnham notes that processes such as mass production, mass distribution, division of labor, and managerial organization seek the goal of “profit maximization, or at least of efficiency” (Capitalism 156-57). Cultural industries’ products are symbols, which are open to interpretation. While these industries strive for profits or efficiency, they also circulate meanings that contribute to the construction of culture. Therefore, the cultural industries as a term has become a strategic and operational concept for debating the role of these industries in issues pertaining to political, economic, social, and cultural issues at national and transnational levels.

The transition from the term “The Culture Industry” to “cultural industries” occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Bernard Miège has pointed out that French scholars have used the term “industries culturelles” to emphasize specificities in each cultural industry (i.e. radio, film, press, etc.) since the late 1970s in a series of essays published in *Capitalisme et Industries Culturelles* (1978) (37). In *The Capitalization of Cultural Production* (1989), an anthology of essays written by Bernard Miège, this author problematizes Adorno and Horkheimer’s work arguing for a more complex vision of the cultural industries. Miège describe them as sites of struggle in the processes of cultural production.

These struggles are present in UNESCO’s research program in the 1970s and 1980s, as John Sinclair recounts in his essay *Culture and Trade: Theoretical and Practical Considerations* (1996) (“Culture” 33). In 1980, UNESCO issued the McBride report that expressed concerns about the imbalance flow of media content from industrialized nations to developing countries. Economic and technological factors facilitated media ownership concentration and the leverage of large corporations on transnational media flows. As a result, these media conglomerates work to the detriment of the diversity of contemporary societies and their cultural development (MacBride 12). The proposal of encouraging developing countries to define their own media policies and to strengthen local mass media was rejected by the United States and Great Britain arguing for a free marketplace of ideas.

The articulation of the contradictions between the cultural and commercial aspects in cultural industries became part of Nicholas Garnham’s detailed approach. Sinclair notes how the pluralized term “industries” allows the inclusion of a diverse range of entities while the adjectival “cultural” provides more room for the many different forms and manifestations of culture (“Culture” 32). This enhanced version of the original Culture Industry concept still reflects the contradictions that the German authors intended when they introduced the term.

In his book *The Cultural Industries* (2007 2nd), David Hesmondhalgh exemplifies the applicability of the cultural industries approach. Throughout his argument, Hesmondhalgh identifies changes and continuities of these industrial entities. Drawing on Garnham's concepts and Bernard Miège's ideas, Hesmondhalgh describes the distinctive characteristics of the cultural industries. These organizations deal with four main problems they need to resolve: high-risk businesses, creativity versus commerce, high production investments against low reproduction costs, and semi-public goods (Cultural Industries 18-22).

The cultural industries deal with high-risk businesses due to the fact it is hard to predict how audiences will react to a new product. Garnham explains it is difficult to identify in precise terms how audiences' use cultural commodities making demand for a new product highly volatile, which means a novelty is always a trial product (Capitalism 160-61). Since cultural goods are often used as social markers or novelties, companies also allow a degree of creative freedom to those directly involved in production. That degree of artistic freedom increases the risks in the business, which companies try to reduce (Hesmondhalgh Cultural Industries 19). The third problem has to do with the fact that while companies invest large sums of money to produce films, television shows, and music records, once the first copy is made, subsequent copies are cheap to reproduce (Hesmondhalgh Cultural Industries 21). This means that each unit of a mass produced cultural product will have a high margin of profit since its reproduction costs are low. However, numerous copies have to be made and sold before the company can recoup its investment. After a break-even point is reached, the sale of the following units could return considerable profits. As Garnham notes, this explains "a powerful thrust toward audience maximization" (Capitalism 160). Finally, cultural industries face the problem that cultural goods are not destroyed in the act of consumption. This means



that many can enjoy the exact same magazine, or film on DVD. These are labeled by economists as “public goods.” In comparison, only one person can enjoy eating a candy bar.

Companies respond to these problems by following a series of strategies. Thus, the cultural industries produce large repertoires, pursue ownership concentration and vertical integration, create artificial scarcity, and exert tight control over distribution and marketing (Hesmondhalgh Cultural Industries 18). By producing a large repertoire of cultural products, companies try to reduce the uncertainties in consumer demand hoping that a few hits will compensate for the many flops. These companies will also attempt to concentrate the ownership of properties to bar or co-opt entrance of newcomers. Through vertical and horizontal integration, they will try to reap the profits in all stages of the life cycle of a product or create synergies around one product through their holding in other sectors.

According to Hesmondhalgh, vertical integration also creates artificial scarcity by controlling and limiting distribution windows (Cultural Industries 23). Other ways to create artificial scarcity are advertising, copyright laws, and restricting access to means of reproduction. The goal is to counter the semi-public characteristic of cultural goods. Without this artificial scarcity, cultural products would swiftly lose their economic value after been released in the market.

Two more strategies are crucial for the present study: formatting, and a tight control of distribution and marketing strategies. By relying on the appeal of movie stars, and producing identifiable types of products as genres or serials, cultural industries intend to reduce risks in consumer demand, hoping tried formulas will succeed again. According to Hesmondhalgh, a genre works as a label informing the audience “the kind of pleasure they can attain by experiencing the product” (Cultural Industries 23). Here I argue that in the case of the documentary form, media executives, distributors, and audiences, tend to have a

misconception of this genre when presented with this label, thus, associating these cultural products to some works from the past that were slow in their pace, solely for instructional purposes, and relied heavily on information.

Cultural industries have also applied these practices as a way to manage the contradictory quality of cultural commodities, symbolic goods and services open to interpretation. Since the cultural industries approach is a strand of the critical political economy tradition, scholars who follow this methodology place those problems and concerns that stem from cultural production under a Marxist perspective. Thus, it is important to differentiate this political economy from others, such as classical and neoclassical political economy.

### **Critical political economy**

A key difference between critical political economy and neoclassical political economy, also known as mainstream economics, is where they stand in regard to issues of power relations and inequalities in society. Vincent Mosco explains these differences in *The Political Economy of Public Communications* (1996). Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, any political economy theory, such as classical, Marxist, or institutional, paid attention to relationships between political and economic factors affecting society (Mosco 27-69). Social issues were key concerns for each political economy strand. What differentiated each strand from one another were the tenets. Classical political economy, represented by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, gave major relevance to the efficiency of a free market, individual interest, profit maximization, use value and exchange value of labor, and accumulation of capital as a means of wealth. Later during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, neoclassical political economy took precedence over classical economy and it became mainstream economy. This strand provides mathematically-

based models to explain and predict the comportment of market economies using laws of supply and demand. However, this approach disregards social, political and historical concerns (Mosco 49). Mainstream economics became ahistorical and universal. Therefore, mainstream economy sees social inequalities as normal events. In opposition to this strand, critical political economy continued to pay attention to issues of power dynamics.

The tenets of critical political economy revolve around social matters that have to do with equity. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock outline the characteristics of critical political economy and its emphasis on the symbolic and economic dimensions of the cultural industries in their essay *Culture, Communications and Political Economy* (2000). They start by distinguishing critical political economy from mainstream economics on four key characteristics. The critical political economy approach is: holistic; historically based; concerned with balance between corporate and public interests; and with issues of equity and social justice (Golding and Murdock 72-73). In their argument, Golding and Murdock discuss how power and social relations interact in cultural production and distribution affecting the public sphere (Golding and Murdock 78). They focus on how economic factors favor certain public discourse over others (Golding and Murdock 85). For instance, these authors problematize the concept of consumer sovereignty, the belief individuals make free choices when purchasing products. Their ideas resonate with this study on distribution problems.

Golding and Murdock highlight barriers and limitations consumers confront when trying to access a wide variety of cultural goods (Golding and Murdock 72-73). This critical view of the distribution channels is relevant to this study on documentary distribution. Audiovisual industry practices could work as filters in the distribution of some goods such as films. The work by these academics shows how scholars in this tradition are able to identify issues of imbalance or inequity in public communication within the cultural industries.

Some scholars normalize U.S. media hegemony based on comparative advantages found in market characteristics such as size, economic power. Some even include language barriers. Steven S. Wildman and Stephen E. Siwek follow this approach in their book *International Trade in Film and Television Programs* (1988). However, this approach does not provide a theoretical framework that could fairly discuss the global power relations and inequalities involved in cultural industries' processes. Colin Hoskins, Stuart McFadyen and Adam Finn have co-authored works in this research tradition, such as *Global Television and Film* (1997), which provide more sound arguments to explain the dominant position of the Hollywood film industry around the world.

Another trend of research known as cultural studies also deals with social struggles and inequalities in cultural production. Cultural studies could actually inform the cultural industries approach regarding the interaction, discourses and struggles among the many individuals involved in cultural production. Cultural studies could also provide analytical tools such as discourse analysis and semiotics to examine the power struggles involved in the representation of reality as found in documentary films.

Cultural studies could enhance a cultural industries approach through its focus on culture, subject's agency and cultural texts within a multidisciplinary framework. In his book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (1997), Stuart Hall defines culture as a process "concerned with the production and exchange of meanings between members of a society or group ... 'making sense' of the world" (2). Thus, cultural industries play a key role in the construction of culture as sites of meaning production and as sites of exchange of these meanings. For cultural studies subject's agency and the interplay of structural determinations on subjects become key in the process of cultural production as Toby Miller explains in *What it is and what it isn't: Introducing...Cultural Studies* (2001)

(1). Individual's agency allows for the possibility of reverting dominant structures. Thus, these concepts could ease criticism of the cultural industries approach if informed by cultural studies.

Through a multidisciplinary approach, cultural studies can also strengthen a cultural industries approach. In this way, theoretical tools drawn from a variety of disciplines work in tandem to produce a more thorough analysis. Néstor García Canclini has stressed the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in his work *Las Industrias Culturales en la Integración Latinoamericana (Cultural Industries and Latin American Integration, 1999)* and *La Globalización Imaginada (The Imagined Globalization, 1999)* (García Canclini et al. 11-20; García Canclini La Globalización 16). Other authors such as Eric Louw in *Media and Cultural Production* (2001) have argued for the contribution that cultural studies can provide to research done within the cultural industries approach by analyzing textual meaning, discourses and issues of identity (Louw 3-4). However, there has been a long debate from scholars on each approach against the project of combining both.

Leading scholars from critical political economy and cultural studies engaged in a discussion around the complications of blending these two frameworks in the academic journal *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* during 1995. Nicholas Garnham, Lawrence Grossberg, James W. Carey, and Graham Murdock exchanged critical views pointing out how problematic this project was. Of the four scholars above mentioned, Graham Murdock presented the most positive stance foreseeing benefits of collaboration between the two approaches. Murdock stated in his essay *Across the Great Divide: Cultural Analysis and the Condition of Democracy* :

“Critical political economy is at its strongest in explaining who gets to speak to

whom and what forms these symbolic encounters take in the major spaces of public culture. But cultural studies, at its best, has much value to say about the how discourse and imagery are organized in complex and shifting patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life.” (94)

Other authors such as Eric Louw, Keith Negus, David Hesmondhalg, and Eileen Meehan have argued strongly for an academic strategy that could combine these two frameworks (2-3; 207-08; Cultural Industries 40-49). For instance, Meehan revisited the discussion between Garnham, Grossberg, Carey and Murdock to articulate an argument about the importance of connecting both types of research to do a thorough study of media corporations (162). In her article *Commodity, Culture, Common Sense: Media Research and Paradigm Dialogue* (1999), Meehan proposes going beyond stereotypes that see cultural studies as so celebratory of oppositional meanings in texts that it dismisses the workings of the media industries. The same goes for stereotypes that describe critical political economy as so focused on dominant corporations and a monolithic economic structure that there is no room for action (158).

Authors from Latin America have also made valuable contributions to the on-going discussions and research on and around cultural industries and cultural production. Among the most prominent in cultural studies are Néstor García Canclini and Jesús Martín-Barbero. García Canclini has discussed how transnational and oligopolistic cultural industries are reconfiguring public spheres, social communication, information and entertainment around the globe, without resolving inequalities (La Globalización 24). This argument is present in works such as *Consumers as Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts* (2001), *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995) and *La*

*Globalización Imaginada*. García Canclini has also edited two anthologies on cultural industries in Latin America and Mexico, in 1999 *Las Industrias Culturales en la Integración Latinoamericana*, and in 1994 *Los Nuevos Espectadores: Cine, Televisión y Video en México* (*New Spectators: Film, Television and Video in Mexico*). Like García Canclini, Jesús Martín-Barbero has argued for media policies to secure spaces for endogenous cultural producers in the cultural industries. For instance, in *Transformations in the Map: Identities and Cultural Industries* (2000), he discusses how the logic of cultural industries and their institutions, such as publicity and international symbols, affect cultural production replacing traditional forms with modern ones while turning people into segmented publics (32). Besides García Canclini and Martín-Barbero, several Mexican authors, coming from disciplines such as cultural studies, media communications, and the cultural industries approach have also made valuable contributions to the study of cultural industries.

Scholars such as José Carlos Lozano and Ana Rosas Mantecón in cultural studies, and Enrique Sánchez Ruíz, in the cultural industries approach, have analyzed cultural industries and themes regarding markets and media policy in Mexico. From this body of research, the work of Enrique Sánchez Ruíz is particularly relevant since Sánchez applies a cultural industries approach to analyze the audiovisual fields in Mexico.

The cultural industries approach is a starting point for formulating a theoretical framework that problematizes the ambiguities and paradoxes in the processes of commodifying cultural production. When informed by those cultural studies that remain critical of these processes, the cultural industries approach turns into a more robust endeavor that allows authors to discuss content and other issues of power relations such as subject's agency. Yet, there is also another piece of this study's theoretical framework that will serve to

describe the inner power struggles that occur in the processes of cultural production. This is Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production.

### **The field of cultural production**

As a concept, the field of cultural production is an extremely helpful theoretical tool for explaining some of the contradictions and complexities within the processes involved in cultural production. While the cultural industries approach provides a framework that describes the characteristics of these industries, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory permits to look at the power relations between the many agents that act inside and around cultural industries. In the anthology *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu describes the field as 'the economic world reversed' (The Field 29). In the logics of this field, cultural producers whose interests are invested in the cultural aspects of their works are losers in economic markets, but winners in terms of symbolic capital, or prestige, as they remain autonomous to the demands of political and economic powers. The field is a conceptual model that helps us comprehend the complexity and ambiguity in the processes of cultural production.

For Bourdieu, the field is a site of forces and a place of struggle. The field is a structured space in which cultural producers, along with their works, struggle against each other for specific positions as a way to gain legitimacy as producers within the field in relation to other positions (Bourdieu The Field 30). Each position helps to define, or re-define, the rest. Based on a system of beliefs (doxa and presuppositions), producers (creators of symbolic work), critics, distributors, and connoisseurs (creators of a belief about the value of the work) struggle to validate cultural producers and cultural production. In the field of audiovisual production, these cultural agents will attempt to define, based on authority given by their cultural capital (knowledge), what a film is (or an *auteur*) and what a movie is (or a



moviemaker) using a series of statements or discourses about producers and their work. These are socially constructed codes, which those agents have used to legitimate or disqualify other agents and their works in the field. For instance, while film festival juries may bestow an award to a documentary film endowing it with symbolic capital (prestige), film distributors strip of legitimacy the commercial distribution of documentaries using industrial criteria and misconceptions that describe the documentary form as a noncommercial genre. These discourses try to establish a legitimate mode of cultural production and distribution.

Two principles of hierarchy organize the field of cultural production: the heteronomous and the autonomous principles (Bourdieu The Field 37-40). The heteronomous principle is success, or economic and political power, measured by sales, profits, or honors. The autonomous principle is consecration, symbolic capital, bestowed by those who follow the system of beliefs that confers prestige. Some producers may reach both, economic success and prestige, but they are usually institutionalized producers. Others may achieve symbolic capital without constraining their work to institutional traditions or industrial practices. Some others may focus exclusively in economic success disregarding any cultural validation. Bohemians or newcomers with no symbolic capital or economic power may try little by little to take better positions within the field.

In the field of cultural production, producers work within two sub-fields (Bourdieu The Field 39). One is the field of restricted production in which producers show a disposition to target their works to other producers, art for art's sake. The other one is the mass-scale field of cultural production, the commercial market, where participants show a disposition to maximize profits.

Scholars in the strand of the cultural industries approach as well as in the trends of cultural studies have followed ideas that Pierre Bourdieu delineated in his theory of the field

of cultural production. That body of research exemplifies the applicability of field theory in the cultural industries approach and cultural studies. For instance, Hesmondhalgh analyzes in an acute and critical way Bourdieu's work in an article entitled *Bourdieu, the media and cultural production* that appeared in the journal *Media, Culture and Society* in 2006. This author highlights the fruitful applications using Bourdieu's theory on the cultural industries today. However, Hesmondhalgh also accounts for several problems in field theory, such as little attention to contemporary cultural production. For instance, Hesmondhalgh examines the forms autonomy takes in modern media organizations. Then, he points out the overlapping of the subfields when production practices blend attributes of large-scale production with those of restricted production ("Bourdieu" 217-29). Hesmondhalgh also refers to Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams's essay *Bourdieu and the Sociology of Culture: An Introduction*. Garnham and Williams highlight how Bourdieu's theory focuses on symbolic power, while providing materialist terms, such as capital, profit, and market to analyze cultural practices in an economic analysis of the mode of production of material life (72). Through their argument, these authors acknowledge how Bourdieu's contributions have often been neglected. However, more academics are starting to pay attention to Bourdieu's field theory.

Other authors have also applied Bourdieu's field theory to cultural industries. Keith Negus has discussed the role of cultural intermediaries in the music industry in articles such as *The Work of Cultural Intermediaries and the Enduring Distance Between Production and Consumption* (2002). Another example is Randal Johnson's essay *TV Globo, the MPA and Contemporary Brazilian Cinema* (2005) in which Johnson applies the concepts of the field of cultural production to Latin American film industries to show the struggles between transnational and local industries, and filmmakers working within the modes of large-scale

production against those working in the restricted sub-field. In those struggles, filmmakers attempt to legitimize a preferred mode of filmmaking practice. In this study, I am interested in identifying similar struggles such as the strategies deployed by distributors to legitimize certain fiction films and how documentary filmmakers argue in favor of their works.

In *Consumers as Citizens*, Néstor García Canclini discusses how valid is today's notion of a certain taste or code, the cultural capital, to appreciate consecrated symbolic works when new technologies and distribution systems highly circulate classical music, paintings or art cinema making them available to the public at large. In relation to documentary distribution, do audiences need a code or cultural capital to appreciate documentaries but not one for fictional films or in-depth news reports? These field theory applications show how pertinent Bourdieu's concepts are to a study on cultural industries, and more in specific, a study on the politics of Mexican documentary distribution. Moreover, Hesmondhalgh's and García Canclini's writings on Bourdieu's field theory also shed light on how to adapt or adjust Bourdieu's ideas to contemporary practices within the cultural industries.

### **Tensions between cultural and economic aspects**

This study examines how documentaries enter commercial distribution among tensions between their cultural and economic values. As documentary filmmakers try to present a perspective different from the mainstream by giving voice to social movements, what happens when the audiovisual images of peasants, construction workers, social movements or historical events become commodified? Yet, through commercial distribution these representations are able to find an audience. My argument does not intend to confront

high-art versus lowbrow art. Yet, in this research I do question why certain films are widely distributed while others receive limited distribution or none.

The documentaries under discussion aim to reach a large audience in the same way other works intend. Following this idea, this research problematizes the notion that documentaries cannot reach a large audience through commercial markets since their contents carry artistic attributes or focus on social and political topics. Crossover, going from niche markets to the mainstream, is possible. Pierre Bourdieu has narrated how Emile Zola re-configured the French literary field during the 19<sup>th</sup> century mobilizing the Naturalist novel to a more popular and commercial status finding a larger audience without losing its artistic characteristics (The Field 53). More recently, Marijke de Valck has described how independent films like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) can find commercial distribution through film festivals (101). Finally, Patricia Zimmermann asserts that it is not possible to analyze the problems of independent documentaries solely in terms of cultural values when the boundaries between public and private space, identities and segmented market, or oppositional work and corporate media becomes at times murky (49). This author highlights instances in which public television has denied airtime to a critical and political documentary that would later be rescued by Time Warner's HBO. Yet, the Mexican case is a different experience.

In Mexico, the control that large corporations have on distribution channels along with political censorship have prompted distributors and authorities to constantly delegitimize the commercial viability of documentaries based on the pretense that viewers need a cultural capital to appreciate them. These same distributors do not question the cultural capital Mexican audiences may need to appreciate films like Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005) where historical knowledge is necessary to understand the narrative or like James Mangold's

*Walk the Line* (2005) when international audience need to know who Johnny Cash is. Perhaps cultural capital is still needed to fully appreciate and understand these works, but marketing strategies are widely mobilizing them to maximize profits. Perhaps when it comes to documentaries commercial distributors prefer to underestimate the audiences' abilities to understand social problems, artistic endeavors, or politics. In any rate, this study questions the tendencies to distribute certain types of films, videos, and television programs while others are barred by industrial practices (as a way to eliminate competition) and political censorship (with the goal to purge dissent.) Both practices are often covered under the veil of a prejudice. This is a discourse against the documentary form that describes it as noncommercial. Thus, these practices send documentary films and videos back to the field of restricted production.

### **Distribution**

Distribution is the crucial moment in which cultural products become available to audiences. Nicholas Garnham has maintained that it is not cultural production, but cultural distribution that is the key locus of power and profit while access to distribution is the key to cultural diversity (Capitalism 160-62). The problem is that the quest for profits and the project of cultural diversity usually clash in the decision-making processes that take place in distribution. As Hesmondhalgh asserts, the ambiguities in cultural industries take part in the organization and circulation of symbolic goods that stress the social inequalities and injustice present in capitalist societies (Cultural Industries 5-6). For this analysis, I prefer to use the term distribution in line with Garnham rather than circulation as Hesmondhalgh proposes. Garnham has used the term distribution to encompass areas such as marketing, publicity, distribution and wholesaling. Hesmondhalgh prefers the concept of circulation for grouping

all those areas mentioned before. While circulation seems more as an analytical and abstract term that could also imply the circulation of meanings within a community, I would argue that the term distribution better connotes the notion of industrial practices and the conflicts stemming from these processes.

For Latin American film industries, a major problem is distribution. These industries have to compete against powerful monopolies without the help of distribution policies (Martín-Barbero 28). In *Global Hollywood*, Miller et al. focus on the worldwide dominance of Hollywood majors and what happens when local industries compete against U.S. distribution networks. The majors will use all their resources to make sure their films get a screen in a local market. Thus, in reference to the argument that recommends European producers to make films people want to see in order to be competitive, Uberto Passolini, a European producer, responds by calling this argument “crap” (qtd. in Miller et al. 148). This producer exposes the work behind the scenes when explaining the presence of American films in European movie theatres, saying they are “movies with terrible reviews that no one cares about, but because a major has the muscle they get them onto those screens” (ibid.). At least in film distribution, the leverage of Hollywood majors and their distribution system provides a better explanation for the high percentage of U.S. film in most countries around the world.

The term cultural intermediary is a key concept in this study on the distribution of Mexican documentaries. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu uses the term to encompass a series of professionals such as TV producers, fashion designers, academics, film critics, advertising professionals and marketers, among others, but his emphasis is on those whose roles attempt to legitimate cultural production (*Distinction* 325). Hesmondhalgh clarifies that Bourdieu differentiated between old and new cultural intermediaries. The old cultural intermediary was

the *connoisseur*, the expert on “serious, legitimate culture in the pre-mass media age (Hesmondhalgh Cultural Industries 66). For Bourdieu, the new cultural intermediary is the new petite bourgeois, such as the film distributor, who does not possess the competence to legitimate culture (Distinction 326). Old and new cultural intermediaries attempt to produce prestige around a cultural product. In the audiovisual fields, they strive to consecrate a film or a TV show. Through their statements and industrial practices, they also define what the legitimate cultural product is that merits commercial distribution.

Film critics, marketers, distributors, and academics mediate between producers and audiences when they promote a film based on its aesthetic values, or when a distributor selects a film for its distribution. Their reputations and positions bestow them with cultural authority in their respective fields. Therefore, cultural intermediaries influence the selection of films that become available to an audience.

## **Documentary**

Documentary is an elusive concept. Several authors have already noted the complications in defining this genre (Nichols Blurred ix-xiii; Chanan The Politics 4-7). Some prefer to describe these works as a film form, nonfiction, in opposition to fiction. John Grierson has said, “documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand (“Principles” 19). Bill Nichols has noticed that the documentary category does not have a fixed territory since the documentary form works as a process instead of a static definition (Representing 12). Here I construct an operational definition for this research.

John Grierson coins the term documentary to distinguish it from films such as *actualités*. In *Documentary: I think We Are in Trouble* (1988), Brian Winston relates how Grierson used the term documentary for the first time in a critique of Robert Flaherty’s

*Moana* (21). Grierson explains in his article *First Principles of Documentary* (1975) how documentaries belong to a category higher than other non-fiction films because of their more structured and argumentative form with purposes of social concern ("Principles" 19). When Grierson describes the documentary form as a creative interpretation of actuality that definition also suggests a broad space for experimentation and flexibility in the genre (Grierson "Story" 121-30; Grierson "Principles" 23). Grierson's definition points out two key aspects of the documentary form: an attempt by the documentary filmmaker to present the film text as a representation of the historical world outside the realm of fictional narratives, but mediated by the stylistic choices made, and political positions taken by the filmmaker.

Debates on the documentary form often revolve around discussions about reality, representation, objectivity, and ethical questions regarding filmmakers' ability to deceive and viewer's ability to recognize documentaries from fiction. Alan Rosenthal reviews these debates in the introduction of the anthology *New Challenges for Documentary* (1988). There, Rosenthal criticizes the philosophical argument that scholars such as Christian Metz have sustained in an attempt to debunk the notion that documentaries hold a truer content than fictional films (12-13). For Rosenthal, this view of documentaries as fictional narratives becomes unhelpful for an analysis of documentaries. Rosenthal's position suggests that the move to conflate in the same category documentaries with fictional films ends up neglecting the differences between fiction and non-fiction forms. Authors who argue for that move would locate under the same label documentaries that present archival footage of the 1940s Holocaust, or those documentaries that recorded the planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers, with fictional films like Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942).

"A water-tight definition of the documentary is effectively impossible," asserts Michael Chanan (*The Politics* 5). This author argues that a discussion of documentaries must



avoid a simplistic equation of documentaries as fiction. However, Chanan struggles as he tries to stress the specificities of documentaries. Even as he emphasizes that fiction is invented and set up for the camera while the latter “consists of scenes drawn from the social and physical world,” Chanan admits this observation is too schematic since it neglects to admit that documentaries are subject to the filmmakers’ manipulation (The Politics 4). In the end, Chanan refers to documentaries as films intended to represent the historical world as the one experienced in daily occurrence, but still shaped by the filmmaker’s choices.

While Michael Renov indicates that fiction and non-fictional forms intertwined at the semiotic, narrative, and performatic levels, this author clarifies that “At the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart, not the formal relations among signifier, signified, and referent” (Renov 2). The historical status of the referent is key to a definition of documentaries. Renov also mentions how documentaries rely on fictional elements when “the presumable objective interpretation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention” (ibid.). Renov’s observation implies the full array of cinematic devices, from the articulation of a character as a hero to a high camera angle, from the use of poetic language to the use of a wide-angle lens. Through these films, documentary filmmakers attempt to represent a historical world that exists outside the scope of the cinematic text, the historical experience of the world on a daily basis. However, these filmmakers do not seize an ultimate truth, but an argument about a historical reality, its mediated version, an interpretation of it, to advance their own interests and goals. Trinh T. Minh-ha asserts that “There is not such a thing as documentary ... despite the visible evidence of the existence of a documentary tradition” (90). What Minh-ha argues for is that documentary filmmakers cannot claim that they are representing *the truth* in their

documentaries, but the construction of meaning, solely a point of view, or an argument that will not become the last statement about occurrences in the historical world.

In *Representing Reality* (1991), Nichols discusses the documentary genre from three different perspectives instead of providing a definitive concept. These three sites are: the institutional practices of documentary filmmaking, the documentaries themselves and the viewers' notions of what a documentary is (Nichols Representing 12). At the viewers' site, audiences decide if the films and videos they watch are documentaries. Nichols says that through an inferential process based on past experience, viewers may be able to recognize that "the images we see (and many of the sounds we hear) had their origin in the historical world" (Representing 25). Here Nichols, like Renov, points to the different status of the historical world. This is clear when Nicholas indicates that "The documentary argument pertains to the historical world itself rather than to an imaginary world more or less similar to the one we inhabit physically" (Representing 25). In this sense, Stella Bruzzi has said that "the fundamental issue of documentary film is the way in which we are invited to access the 'document' or 'record' through representation or interpretation, to the extent that a piece of archive material becomes mutable rather than a fixed point of reference" (12). Thus, this returns to the notion of documentaries as a mediated version, an interpretation of a historical world.

In his book *Blurred Boundaries*, Nichols first asserts that the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction have revealed blurred as a result of political and ideological contestation to forms and purposes, just to ask later, "Is there any 'there' there, beyond the frame?" (Blurred xi). Nichols moves beyond claims of authenticity, and objectivity, but still refers to the historical world that exists beyond the image on the screen. He concedes that "the historical world of actual occurrences" is shaped and determined by the act of

representation. Nichols returns to the indexical sign (a sign that points to the referent, a sign that is physically or causally connected to the referential signified) only to emphasize that meaning is located in the act of mediation. He notes that “signification resides within the selection and arrangement of indexical representations, not in indexicality per se any more than in things themselves” (Blurred xi). Based on the discussion previously introduced and for the purpose of this research, here I present a definition of documentaries. Documentaries are those films and videos that intend to represent a historical world, not as an imaginary one, but as one of actual occurrences beyond the cinematic text, while in fact the representation of this historical world is a mediation and interpretation whereby the film or video constructs meanings of that world from the perspectives and interests of the filmmakers. In this study of Mexican documentaries, most documentaries work as an argument centered on a Mexican experience and focused on Mexican subjects from artistic, cultural, social, political, and historical perspectives.

### **About Mexican documentaries**

In the literature on the documentary form, references to Mexican documentaries are scarce. Recognition to these films is scattered through a few monographs, reference books, and anthologies. Brief phrases and paragraphs constitute a piecemeal collection of allusions to the Mexican documentary. For instance, in the three-volume *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (2006) edited by Ian Aitken, there are barely four pages dedicated to an article on the Mexican documentary. Another instance is Julianne Burton’s *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (1990) that only includes one Mexican scholar, Margarita de Orellana, writing on Mexican documentaries from the 1910s (211-15). In this same anthology Michael Chanan briefly talks about the work of Eduardo Maldonado in his essay

*Rediscovering Documentary: Cultural Context and Intentionality* as an example of *cine testimonio*, in which those lacking resources and access to media have an opportunity to express their social needs ("Rediscovering Documentary: Cultural Context and Intentionality" 40-41). While there is no doubt Burton's compilation is one of extreme relevance to the study of Latin American documentaries, Mexican documentaries are underrepresented.

Brazilian scholar Paulo Antonio Paranaguá's anthology *Cine Documental in Latinoamérica (Documentary Film in Latin America, 2003)* includes nine reviews of Mexican documentaries, an article on Juan Carlos Rulfo and an interview with documentary pioneer, Carlos Velo. It seems that this compilation of articles finally acknowledges the importance of the Mexican documentary and gives it the attention it deserves. The sample is a diverse set of documentaries that deal with urban and rural issues such as those in Maricarmen de Lara's *No les Pedimos un Viaje a la Luna (We are not Asking for a Trip to the Moon, 1986)* and in Paul Leduc's *Etnocidio: Notas sobre el Mezquital*, respectively. The only problem is that while the number of documentaries included is substantial, the brevity of the articles does not permit a more desirable in-depth analysis of these productions.

Among the best contributions to Mexican documentary literature is José Roviro's two-volume work, *Miradas a al Realidad*. Through a series of interviews with documentary filmmakers like Eduardo Maldonado and Nicolás Echevarría, Roviro presents a panorama of the documentary field in Mexico from 1986 to 1989. One problem that many filmmakers address through these interviews is the issue of distribution and exhibition (Roviro 89). Symptomatic of this it is the fact that most of the documentary filmmakers admit that they have only seen a limited number of Mexican documentaries. Their comments work as a diagnosis of the state of documentary production and distribution in Mexico, a diagnosis that

is still valid today. Rovirosa's research deals directly with problems Mexican documentary filmmakers have faced.

### **The nation, the public sphere, diversity, and the Mexican documentary**

Here, I succinctly touch upon four key concepts in this research: the nation, the public sphere, diversity, and the Mexican documentary. First, the scope of this study is set within Mexican boundaries due to the importance of the local in global times. Even if transnational processes seem to overshadow the role of the nation-state (Dahlgren 17), Giddens has pointed out that the world still functions in terms of nation-states as political systems "controlling structures - legal, administrative, financial, military, surveillance, and informational - in which we all live" (qtd. in Sreberny 115). Arjun Appadurai asks, "if the nation-state disappears, what mechanism will assure the protection of minorities, the minimal distribution of democratic rights, and the reasonable possibility of the growth of civil society?" (19).

Relying on authors such as Benedict Anderson, Susan Hayward highlights that the nation-state as an imagined community as well as national identities are ideological constructions that pass as natural to reify culture as fixed, essential, and distinctive, notions that often serve the interests of the powerful (89-90). Then, it follows that national cinema, as a territorialized body of films, is also a construction. Through these cultural artifacts, filmmakers may attempt to represent the nation, but those representations are part of the debates that discuss the nation in different ways and perspectives. To analyze and define national cinemas, Hayward points toward Tom O'Grady's approach to study national cinemas as "a series of sets of relations between national films texts, national and international film industries, and the films' and industries' socio-political and cultural

contexts” (92). Hayward explains that national cinema is an “*object of knowledge*” since each national film contributes to an idea of a national cinema, but national cinema is also a “problem of knowledge” as the concept should avoid naturalization and it should question politics of inclusion/exclusion, and the purpose of a national cinema and film policies (93). In this study, I analyze Mexican documentaries as films that reveal the conflicts and power struggles that intend to represent Mexico’s political and social issues from a particular perspective. To examine how these films are able to enter the public sphere through commercial distribution is key to understand who gets to contribute to these discussions and what meanings and points of views about those issues get mobilized.

Jürgen Habermas originally conceived the concept of the public sphere in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1961. Habermas described the public sphere as a public space where male and educated bourgeois publicly gathered as private individuals to engage in rational-critical debates about public issues of commodity exchange and social labor in a context where everybody stood in equal universal rights and no one had power over other person thanks to their status as property owners (27). Habermas indicates this public sphere only took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, and it has disappeared with the emergence of commercialized mass media (159-80). Many authors have problematized and adapted this term for contemporary analysis.

Today, mass media constitutes a prominent space of the public sphere. The circulation of documentaries through different channels of distribution means that their contents are entering the public sphere, thus, becoming part of the continuous debates and discussions people have on different issues, events and stories. In *Television and the Public Sphere* (1995), Peter Dahlgren considers that since the scale of modern society only allows small group of individuals to gather, then mass media becomes the chief institution of the

public sphere (7). Nicholas Garnham highlights the importance of mass media as the main site of the public sphere in relation to issues of cultural identity. Garnham affirms that, “We see ourselves . . . in terms of ways of seeing these identities that are constructed in and through mediated communication: soap operas, novels, films, songs, etc.” (“The Media” 360). Moreover, Garnham criticizes the Habermas’s notion that the public sphere can only exist in a liberal economy. The liberal model neglects inequalities of distribution of economic power as well as external factors while emphasizing distribution over production and assuming perfect and universally accessible information (N. Garnham “The Media” 367). Nancy Fraser suggests that Habermas’s original conceptualization of the public sphere curbs groups that do not agree with the idea that their social needs can be satisfied by liberal democracy and capitalism (109-42). In relation to the public sphere, diversity in audiovisual distribution will permit a broader range of issues and perspectives available for audiences to debate in order to make sense of their political and economic context.

In his essay *Deconstructing the Diversity Principle* (1999), Philip Napoli develops an analytical framework to study diversity in media. Napoli defines three broad attributes of diversity: source in terms of production companies and filmmakers; content in terms of genres, location of stories or topics, and diversity of ideas; and exposure in terms of audience consumption (7-34). The present study focuses on diversity only in terms of source and content. Media scholar José Carlos Lozano argues that “the greater the scope of genres and different types of formats, the greater the satisfaction of information, entertainment, or education needs of diverse audience groups,” (472). Lozano asserts in a study on Mexican television that, “. . . diversity in program and genre type is extremely low” with some genres including documentaries appearing only marginally (473). This limited availability of

documentaries is also found in the film and video fields. In this research, I pay attention to content diversity in relation to the limits in the distribution of Mexican documentaries.

Based on the aforementioned definition of documentaries and for the purpose of this research, two characteristics distinguish Mexican documentaries from other films in this genre. First, in these films, videos, and TV programs Mexican producers and filmmakers take a prominent role. Second, these documentaries focus on Mexican subjects and the historical world within a Mexican context. The Mexican documentary lends itself to the elaboration of arguments that touch upon political, economic, social, and cultural issues from a variety of points of view constructing meanings about this nation and its inhabitants.

### **Mexican cinema**

The literature on Mexican cinema that is most relevant to the present research centers on the years from the 1960s to the present. This literature analyzes political and economic crises as well as the new era of new technologies and neoliberal media policies. First in this list is Carl J. Mora's *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1988* published in 1989, and a recent 2004 edition that covers the 1989-2004 period (Mexican Cinema). The book presents vital data on the status of the film industry and media policies from the 1960s to the end of 2004. The anthology *Mexican Cinema* edited in 1995 by Paulo Antonio Paranaguá is also a comprehensive volume covering many aspects and most eras of Mexican cinema. In this book, essays like Andrés de Luna's *The Labyrinths of History* briefly make references to documentaries such as *El Grito* and filmmakers like Paul Leduc and Nicolás Echeverría . They form part of the 1960s-1970s period in which documentary production in Mexico experienced a sort of re-birth amidst political tensions.



A useful third work for this purpose is the group of essays in *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers* compiled by Joanne Hershfield and David R. Maciel in 1999. In this text, David Maciel's *Cinema and the State in Contemporary Mexico, 1971-1999* is an excellent source of information about how the State deployed its media policies during those years and how the film industry reacted to these policies. Besides, these three aforementioned anthologies, there are other works that form an important group of sources on Mexican cinema.

Three anthologies on Latin American cinema also inform this study on the distribution of Mexican documentaries. One of them is *Visible Nations: Latin American Cinema and Video* edited by Chon A. Noriega in 2000. In this work, Patricia Aufderheide writes about the video technology factor that has boosted grassroots video production in Latin America. Her essay *Grassroots video in Latin America* covers a wide spectrum of instances in which grassroots groups have taken advantages of this technology. Also, *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, edited by John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado is an important compilation of essays. Two of them discuss media policies in the Mexican film industry. Despite the fact that Randal Johnson's *In the Belly of the Ogre* pays more attention to media policies in Brazilian cinema, this analysis compares the Brazilian case with other cinemas in Latin America, including Mexican cinema. Of major relevance is the fact that Johnson applies Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to his analysis. In another essay, *Mexican Cinema Comes Alive*, Nissa Torrents presents an overview of contemporary Mexican cinema. However, Torrents fails to deliver a critical analysis of the changes in media policies. The first part of this essay reads more like an uncritical historical account of these policies. The last anthology is *New Latin American Cinema*, a collection of seminal essays edited in two volumes by Michael T. Martin. Among many essays, I highlight

Maciel's article *Serpientes y Escaleras: The Contemporary Cinema of Mexico: 1976-1994*. In his argument, Maciel offers a detailed analysis of the transformation in media policies during those years. Maciel also articulates some explanations for the rebirth of Mexican cinema after difficult times in the late 1970s and 1980s. In this historical account, Maciel analyzes the common traits in successful filmmakers.

Other works serve as important reference sources on Mexican cinema. One of them is Emilio García Riera's gigantic account, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano* (1992). This seventeen-volume history of Mexican cinema includes detailed information about Mexican film production from 1896 to 1987. Film reviews of Mexican documentaries present facts such as opening date and the number of weeks in movie theaters. In addition to García Riera's work, the books by the renowned and acerbic film critic Jorge Ayala Blanco also provide an important source of information. Some of his books are *La Aventura del Cine Mexicano* (1968, 1979 2<sup>nd</sup>) and *La Condición del Cine Mexicano (1973-1985)* (1986). The relevance of Ayala's books lies on his detailed reviews on films like *El Grito*, *María Sabina* and *El Niño Fidencio* directed by Echevarría and his comments on documentary collectives such as *Cine Octubre* and *Canal 6 de Julio*.

One final reference work is the *Wide Angle* issue on the *super ochero* movement edited by Jesse Lerner in July 1999. A group of filmmakers formed this movement devoted to filmmaking using 8mm film format during the 1960s and 1970s. This was part of a counter cultural trend, independent from the government's *Nuevo Cine Mexicano*. This *Wide Angle* issue pays attention to documentaries of collectives such as *Taller Experimental de Cine Independiente* and *Taller de Cine Marginal*. The research works mentioned in this section help to produce a more thorough study on documentary distribution in Mexico.

## **Scope and Limitations**

The present study examines three case studies of documentary distribution, which exemplify the politics behind the circulation of Mexican documentaries in Mexico in the 1988-2006 period. This research contributes to a discussion on the distribution of Mexican documentaries and not a comprehensive historical account of documentary distribution practices in Mexico. A detailed and overarching study of each documentary instance and its distribution during the 1988-2006 period is an enterprise beyond the scope of this research.

In addition, this study does not try to encompass audience research or consumption practices. At the most, I pay attention to those involved in the power struggles within distribution practices in Mexico. Filmmakers, distributors, film officials and others who take part in distributing audiovisual works are a small, but critical audience for this research. They are the first ones to see, and decide, what gets into distribution. Therefore, they impact the diversity of choices of the audiences at large.

In terms of information, this research has faced limitations on data gathering. One has been lack of reliable data available to analyze cultural industries in Mexico. First, the continuous divesting or privatization of State controlled media industries from one government administration to another has complicated the collection and maintenance of reliable databases. Ideally, these databases would include detailed statistics on specific cases of cultural production or distribution. In a similar manner, the private entities that function as the audiovisual industry lobbying associations have not had the capacity to keep track of each audiovisual work that has circulated through the commercial distribution channels. Another obstacle that all media industry academic researchers face is the lack of access to data by private media corporations. These entities are not willing to share information on distribution practices that have helped them to gain a foothold in the film, video or television industry.

Finally, the project of bringing together a cultural industries approach informed by cultural studies, and supported by field theory is achieved with the purpose of constructing a robust theoretical framework that compensates for the possible gaps in each approach if solely applied. I have explained the complementary functions between critical political economy and cultural studies above as a way to resolve their mutual criticisms. In addition, I have mentioned how the field of cultural production can enhance the scope of a cultural industries analysis. However, any theoretical framework or approach will spark some criticism since there is not one without shortcomings. My goal has been to minimize them.

### **Chapter outline**

This dissertation on the politics of distribution of the Mexican documentary in Mexico, 1988-2006, consists of five chapters. As presented here, this first chapter serves as introduction to my purpose, goals and theoretical frameworks. Here I delineated the three case studies under analysis, and elaborated a literature review. The second chapter discusses the theatrical distribution of documentary films produced by La Media Luna and directed by Juan Carlos Rulfo. In this chapter, I analyze the strategies this documentary filmmaker has employed to enter the highly competitive film distribution sector in Mexico. In chapter three, I study the distribution of documentaries by video collective Canal 6 de Julio. My analysis examines how this collective developed a strategy that allows them to continue the production of militant documentaries and their distribution. Chapter four centers on the documentary TV series produced by Editorial Clío, *México Siglo XX*, today renamed *México Nuevo Siglo*. In this chapter, I analyze the role of Televisa, a giant media corporation, in the commercial distribution of these television documentaries. Finally, in chapter five, I present my conclusions and questions for further research.

## Chapter 2

### **Juan Carlos Rulfo's documentary films and theatrical distribution: neoliberal policies, Hollywood dominance, and smoke screens**

On July 7, 2000, national film distributor Nuvisión<sup>4</sup> finally released in commercial movie theatres Juan Carlos Rulfo's documentary *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo (I Forgot, I Don't Remember, 1998)*. Almost two years had passed since Rulfo had finished *Del Olvido*, his first feature-length documentary film (Galicia "Luego" 8B). During those years, Rulfo had taken this documentary through a prolonged journey of national and international film festivals in a quest for prestige, a film distributor, and finally, an available play date, culminating in an "opening weekend," in commercial movie theatres. By September 1999, *Del Olvido* had garnered two Best First Work awards, one at the Montreal Film Festival, and another one at the International Film Festival in Biarritz, France. In October, Nuvisión was already onboard, and Rulfo was talking about the upcoming release of *Del Olvido* in January 2000 (Suárez n. p.). However, the wait for an opening weekend slot had just begun.

During his journey, Juan Carlos Rulfo has followed a series of formal and informal strategies to accumulate prestige and notoriety for his documentary work in his path toward commercial movie theatres. Thus, Rulfo has established his own production company, implemented semi-industrial practices to produce a film, participated in film festivals, and sought media coverage. Through these strategies, Rulfo has seized a position as independent and innovative documentary filmmaker in Mexican cinema. By employing these strategies, Rulfo has been able to compete in a distribution market dominated by large national, but especially, transnational corporations.

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<sup>4</sup> Also known as *Nu Vision*. Since 2004, Nuvisión has ceased operations.

In Mexico, as in many parts of the world, Hollywood films and look-alike movies are the preferred film mode for theatrical distribution. Hollywood majors and their distributors have resorted to numerous strategies to situate their films at a dominant position in the Mexican film industry. The international and vertical integrated Hollywood studios have historically aimed to control distribution channels, saturating the markets to maximize their revenues (Drake 75). In Mexico, neoliberal economic policies have exacerbated this trend.

Rulfo and his small film company La Media Luna have experienced the neoliberal reconfiguration of the Mexican film industry that has shored up the operation of international distributors and exhibitors in this territory during the 1990s. These trends have contained national film production. By 2005, national films are re-emerging, but several are displaying a resemblance to Hollywood movies to enter the market. Most Mexican films that deviate from the dominant mode of film production have confronted distribution and exhibition barriers. That is the plight of documentaries like *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo*.

In this context, distributors have treated Mexican documentary films with disdain based on a preconceived discourse that deems this corpus of films as noncommercial. These argumentations function as smoke screens to conceal or deflect attention from the conditions and practices of distribution and exhibition in Mexico. After all, according to some authors, film distributors know “nothing about audience tastes and ... approximately 95 percent of films will fail abysmally” (Miller et al. 150). Regardless of this, many distributors in Mexico have contributed to build a discourse that strip of legitimacy the commercial viability of documentaries. This is an informal strategy, not planned out, but a facile recourse, to bar the entrance of competition into the already saturated theatrical circuits. This informal practice works in tandem with the sophisticated and industrialized distribution and marketing strategies employed for Hollywood films. Thus, Mexican documentary distribution confronts

three main entry barriers to the market. They are the neoliberal conditions in the Mexican film industry, the highly industrialized and capital-intensive distribution of Hollywood films, and a discourse opposing the entrance of documentaries into commercial distribution. Among these barriers, I am mostly interested in examining the third one in contrast with strategies deployed by Rulfo and his film company to usher their films into commercial distribution.

Through La Media Luna, Rulfo has entered the field of cinema making films that deviate from the alleged *norm*. In this sense, this filmmaker has made a contribution, even if small, to diversify the film repertoire on domestic screens through his stylish, but endearing and down-to-earth documentaries. In 2006, Rulfo would release his second feature-length documentary film, *En el Hoyo (In the Pit, 2005)*. This time, having La Media Luna as distributor, Rulfo would deal with commercial distribution on his own terms.

In this analysis on La Media Luna's documentary distribution, *Del Olvido's* distribution takes center stage first as way to show the process whereby Juan Carlos Rulfo and his associates in La Media Luna learned about the challenges in documentary distribution. By the end of this essay, I will discuss *En el Hoyo's* distribution to illustrate how La Media Luna incorporated the acquired knowledge from *Del Olvido's* experience in distribution. Also toward the final part of this account, I will briefly mention the barriers that other documentary filmmakers have found in the commercial distribution of their works.

Since 1995, Rulfo and his partners at La Media Luna have attempted to contest the strategies national and transnational distributors and exhibitors employ to curtail the entrance of new competitors. The number of Mexican documentaries that have found commercial distribution has increased since *Del Olvido's* release in 2000. However, distribution practices

continue to restrain their circulation. In the 2000-2006 period, Mexican filmmakers produced 28 feature-length documentary films, but only 13 found commercial distribution<sup>5</sup>.

If a documentary finds distribution, the distributor would usually launch a limited release consisting of less than five film prints, revealing low expectations of box office success. They are more concerned with minimizing losses in marketing costs (i.e. film prints, posters, print media), than in providing the documentary with better opportunities at the box office in a competitive market. These distributors argue that documentaries lack commercial viability. They describe these films as narrow in scope, controversial, elitist, educational, or artistic. As a contradiction, these distributors are hoping to cash some profits in the long run through other distribution channels. After its theatrical release, the life cycle of a film continues in ancillary markets through different formats and time periods called media windows such as pay-per-view, cable, broadcasting television, and DVD sales.

For Hollywood studios, these markets are vital. By 2005, DVD sales and rentals could add more than 50 percent of total revenues from a new film release (Booth C1; Fithian 13). By the end of 2006, home entertainment represented more than 70 percent in revenues (Kagan 68). These numbers could increase with new media technologies incorporating video-on-demand (VOD) and Internet downloads. However, if film distributors are solely counting on these markets in Mexico, they are missing the whole picture.

The political economic conditions in Mexico make the movie theatre business a more vital part of a film's life cycle than in the United States. First, movie theatre attendance has not declined as in other countries. Attendance slowly grew from 130 million tickets sold in 2000 to 165 million tickets in 2006 (IMCINE Cinema 146; IMCINE "Indicadores"). In addition, while ancillary markets are important in Mexico, they face challenges in video

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<sup>5</sup> Source: IMCINE, and CANACINE.



piracy and a low market penetration in pay television, and Internet. Piracy has severely affected DVD sales, which declined to 41 percent in 2006 (López 2). That year, pay television had less than 25 percent of market penetration, and only 20 percent of the population had Internet access (Villamil "Nueva" 66; Aceves 10). Moreover, a theatrical release remains a key promotional device and a measure to forecast revenues in ancillary markets (Drake 164). A limited release would thwart the film's profitability in all media windows.

In his attempt to present his documentaries to a broad audience, Juan Carlos Rulfo and his small production house La Media Luna have become part of the power struggles involved in securing commercial distribution for a Mexican documentary within a highly competitive distribution and exhibition market. In these struggles, tensions emerge between cultural and economic interests. Independent filmmakers often try to negotiate between opportunities and risks to gain prestige, but also economic success producing tensions and contradictions in these endeavors. Some authors suggest that the artistic, social, or political relevance of cultural works do not always exclude these cultural products from the possibility of having commercial success, especially in expanding markets and in times of social changes (Bourdieu The Field 51-55; Johnson 209; García Canclini Consumers 120). Those have been the conditions of Mexico's political economy since the 1990s. However, the complex interaction of forces in the field of cinema has resulted in ambiguous and contradictory situations for documentary films when cultural and economic interests overlap. These situations occur at both ends: the cultural side of independent filmmaking and its industrial counterpart. These ambiguities and contradictions offer opportunities and risks.

### **The cultural side of documentary distribution**

Movie theatre screens represent a space in which documentary filmmakers can express visions of their surroundings through representations of a historical reality intended to be presented mostly as unprepared events and unrehearsed situations even if mediated by these filmmakers. The documentary films that are the center of this study elicit discussions and become part of the construction of meanings on an imagined community based on social agents participating in events in the physical world. In this sense, *Del Olvido*'s theatrical distribution has helped to diversify the film repertoire on Mexican screens by providing new ways to represent Mexican culture through the cinematic record of testimonies and experiences of social agents often neglected by films found in movie theatres. Rulfo has said that *Del Olvido* is about "everyday life, about a fleeting life, about songs that are getting lost; about the many things the old people know and they are forgetting ... in a Mexican nation that is forgetting its past" (Peguero 25).

This documentary filmmaker has also expressed his interests in making films in which audiences can recognize themselves (Alvarado "No escuchas" 2E). The relevance of Mexican documentaries reaching the commercial circuits resides not only in sustaining the continuous production of this genre, but the symbolic aspects in finding spaces to communicate ideas with diverse points of views to spark discussions among viewers about their own surroundings. In neoliberal times, the spaces available to construct a public sphere are rapidly shrinking threatened by private interests. Chilean documentary filmmaker Patricio Guzmán has said that a country without documentaries is like a family without a photo album (Guzmán). On Mexico's movie screens, audiences rarely get to see their photos.

Three key issues are at stake in *La Media Luna*'s documentary distribution: cultural diversity on Mexican screens; Mexican filmmakers' right to construct their own visions of

their culture; and the commercial distribution of these films to make these film productions sustainable and widely available. Jesús Martín-Barbero has mentioned how “local and regional cultures are ... constantly demanding greater self-determination - the right to count in political and economic decisions and to create their own images (29). National documentary filmmakers chiefly produce their films as a way to express their particular perspectives and points of views about a Mexican reality in dialogue with audiences they are hoping to find.

### **Film distribution in the Mexican film industry: a context**

Film juries, critics, and audiences praised *Del Olvido* for its virtuous and yet warm depiction of a rural Mexican region and its dwellers. The documentary combined captivating aerial views of vast plains, time-lapse cinematography of vibrant horizons, and an intimate and light-hearted portrait of the villagers of this land, endearing elders who struggled to recollect old songs, and treasured memories. Several critics noticed Rulfo’s innovative and experimenting style, including the suggestion that Rulfo was constructing fiction from the fleeting memories of the documentary’s protagonists. However, despite its international accolades and positive reviews, *Del Olvido*’s release date was postponed for several months to accommodate a line-up of fiction films, especially Hollywood productions.

In Mexico, film distribution revolves around the Hollywood majors. Through their distribution branches, and domestic allies, they control the distribution business. In 1995, the Hollywood majors with distribution offices in Mexico included Columbia-Tristar, Twentieth Century Fox, and United International Pictures, a Paramount-Universal joint venture. By 2003, Buena Vista International and Columbia-Tristar allied in a new distribution alliance. The distribution arm of Mexican media conglomerate Televisa, Videocine, represents Warner

Bros and New Line Cinema films. Gussi Artecinema, a smaller distributor, has built a portfolio based on American films since the 1970s (Zamarripa 144). Through their control over distribution channels, these distributors have privileged the entrance into commercial movie theatres of their own films, and films that share similar formats. Thus, these distributors have established a preferred mode of filmmaking practice. Néstor García Canclini calls it *cine-mundo*, the world film (La Globalización 160). These films are the blockbuster, the action adventure movie, the romantic comedy and the likes. That is, the formula-genre Hollywood film, often a “the dazzling spectacle” relying on “sophisticated visual technologies and marketing strategies” (García Canclini Hybrid 92). For distributors and exhibitors, this is the legitimate film mode, which can reach commercial distribution.

Since the implementation of neoliberal policies in Mexico in the 1990s, Hollywood films have dominated around 90 percent of screen time (Getino 129; Sánchez Ruíz "Cine" 62-63; Martínez Garza and Lozano 61). Progressively, the Mexican film market has escalated into one of the most profitable for the MPA members<sup>6</sup> and its film production. While in 1998 the MPA ranked its box office profits in Mexico in thirteenth place worldwide, by 2004 the MPA placed Mexico's receipt market in fourth place around the globe (Mora Mexican Cinema 2004 253). According to IMCINE, the distribution business increased 30 percent in the 1995–2004 period (Taibo Factores 6).

The 1990s neoliberal economic policies reconfigured the forces in the Mexican film industry. The Salinas administration (1988-1994) accelerated the already-started divesting process of state-owned film holdings in preparation to the free market approach dictated by NAFTA. Unlike the Canadian government, Mexican authorities did not have recourse to the

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<sup>6</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) represents the interests of Sony Pictures (Columbia-Tristar), Disney Studios, Paramount Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal Pictures, and Warner Bros. The Motion Picture Association (MPA) is MPAA's international counterpart.

cultural exemption<sup>7</sup> arguing Mexico had a millenarian cultural heritage, a stronghold against any foreign influence (Galperin 631). NAFTA included the Mexican cultural industries with only two provisions. Foreign investments in audiovisual industries could only reach up to 49 percent of ownership, and screen quotas could only be set up to 30 percent (Galperin 632). However, the 1992 film law that congress passed during the Salinas government treated films as sheer commercial products. This law intended to eliminate screen quotas by 1998, going beyond the demands of the NAFTA treaty.

After liquidating financial film institutions and shutting down production units in previous years, the Mexican government declared in bankruptcy the two state-owned distributors, Películas Mexicanas (Latin American markets) in 1988, and Películas Nacionales (home market) in 1991, and then sold the deteriorated state-owned movie theatre chain, COTSA in 1993 (Getino 128). That year, the government also eliminated caps to box office ticket prices, which had been part of the so-called basket of basic goods since the 1949 film legislation (Hinojosa 46). Until then, the controlled box office ticket had been affordable to all economic classes.

As the result of these changes, national and transnational exhibition companies revamped the decaying movie theatre palaces and invested in new multiplexes, often anchored at shopping malls. Cinemark arrived in 1994 (Estrada). The same year, American and national investors joined forces to create Cinemex (Aguilar "Casi" 3). In a few years, Cinemex became the second-largest multiplex chain in the nation despite its concentration in Mexico City. The long-time national and largest exhibitor Organización Ramírez, re-branded its theatres, now multiplexes, as *Cinépolis* in 1995. Other movie theatre chains would also enter the market such as the transnational General Cinema Corporation (Sánchez Ruíz "Cine"

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<sup>7</sup> Cultural exemptions exclude cultural exports (i.e. audiovisual goods) from international free trade agreements in the notion of protecting national identities. See Sinclair, *Culture and Trade*, 38.

67). Since then, middle and upper classes predominantly attend these modern movie theatres. By 2006, Organización Ramírez (Cinépolis) was the only national exhibitor among the top four theatre chains (Cinemex, Cinemark, and MM Cinemas).

In 1994, an economic crisis hit Mexico. Eventually, distributors and exhibitors passed the critical moment, accelerating their growing pace. The number of screens in Mexico went from 1,145 in 1993, to 2,105 in 1998 (Gómez "Industria" 264). However, the laissez-faire economic policies only favored the growth of the distribution and exhibition sectors controlled by large national media conglomerates, but mostly by transnational corporations like the Hollywood film distributors. In contrast, national producers were ensnared in the economic crisis and with no mechanisms to get back on track. Neoliberal policies had significantly reduced the role of the State as financial backer of film productions. Thus, the new economic environment contained the growth of national film production and its distribution. In 1993, Mexico produced 53 films and released 49 (Sánchez Ruíz "Cine" 57,69). In 1998, Mexico reached its lowest production level since the 1930s, only producing 11 films and releasing the meager amount of 8 (Gómez "Industria" 262; Mora Mexican Cinema 2004 251). If there was a Mexican cinema comeback at the turn of the century, this was jumpstarted by the lobbying of a national film community, from filmmakers to film officials, for state intervention.

At the end of 1997, the government, under the film community's pressure, established FOPROCINE, a film fund to funnel monies to quality Mexican film productions. Toward the end of 1998, also through their lobbying, the more plural and democratic congress elected in 1997 amended the 1992 neoliberal film law adding an emphasis on cultural aspects of film production previously absent (Joskowicz 77-80). These reforms would freeze at 10 percent the declining screen quota, which was susceptible to disappear by

1998. The new legislation also created a new film fund, FIDECINE, for commercially oriented films, but still with film festival appeal. Yet, the Zedillo administration (1994-2000) would not pass the regulation necessary to enforce these changes. While FOPROCINE immediately re-activated national film production, further changes would have to wait until the PRI regime was gone. The Fox administration (2000-2006) would formalize the regulation for the 1998 film reforms. Nevertheless, Mexican cinema had its first box office success in Antonio Serranos's *Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas* (*Sex, Shame, and Tears*, 1998), a co-production between the State and private investors.

In 1999, Mexican producers were excited about the possibilities of film production in the Mexican film industry after witnessing the box office success of *Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas*. At the time, Serrano's film became the highest grossing movie in the history of Mexican cinema, reaching over five million viewers, and making more than \$12 million (12 times its cost) in box office revenues (Cázares; Tarifeño 49; Lazcano "Lleva" 18). As narrated by film critic Leonardo García Tso, the fact that this film "out-blockbusted *The Phantom Menace* ... offered ample evidence that there was a huge middle-class public willing to pay to see Mexican films at the multiplex (García Tsao 11). Private investors rushed in following the steps of Titán Producciones, the producers behind the film that jump-started Mexican film production again. Nuvisión is a result of this context.

### ***Del Olvido* and documentary distribution**

The terms in which *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo* receives a theatrical release shows a series of contradictions, and barriers in the distribution of a documentary film in its own territory. *Del Olvido*'s distribution faced opportunities and limitations. This documentary found a fertile ground in the changing environment in the film industry around 2000. One of

them is the presence of a new national distributor, Nuvisión. However, Nuvisión put in place a limited release with no marketing campaign elevating the challenges for *Del olvido*'s distribution in a competitive market. Even though other distributors in Mexico would release a few more Mexican feature-length documentary films after *Del Olvido*'s release, those distribution conditions continued to be inadequate, putting Mexican documentaries at a disadvantage in the exhibition circuits.

The box office success of *Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas* catalyzed the entrance of new investors in film production. Thus, Corporación Interamericana de Entretenimiento, CIE, founded Estudios México in a fifty-fifty partnership with Carlos Slim's SINCA Inbursa in 1999 (CIE "CIE"). Estudios México established its film production house Altavista Films, and its distribution arm, Nuvisión. The goals set by Estudios México would reveal tensions between the obvious economic interests, and the more subtle cultural ones. *Del Olvido*'s distribution is part of those tensions and the ambiguities and contradictions ensued by them.

In a press conference, Federico González Compeán, speaking as head of both Estudios México and Altavista Films, outlined this film corporation's goals with statements that appeared to contradict each other. In synthesis, González Compeán said they wanted to make films Hollywood style, films for pure entertainment, profitable, and away from *auteur* cinema, and yet, without taking risks and telling stories in which Mexican audiences could recognize themselves (qtd. in Arias 1). This film executive also pointed out the inequalities of film distribution in Mexico. As a strategy to break those market barriers, Nuvisión would distribute Altavista's film production, and other national and international films in Mexico and Latin America.

When Nuvisión forayed into the national film distribution market, other small national distributors were competing in the business, among them, Latina Film and Nueva



Era. The latter was a distributor focusing on Latin American cinema. The former had a portfolio of French films. They were targeting a niche not covered by Hollywood distributors. They were evidence of the small areas of opportunity in the business.

Nuvisión distributed 11 films in 1999, reached a peak of 14 films in 2003, and faded away with one film in 2004 (CIE "Reporte"; Ayala). Estudios Mexico's distributor would continue to exist as a company. In 2003, Efrén Saldívar, Operation and Royalties manager from Altavista Films, the film production company that still handles Nuvisión's business, suggested that the closing of Nuvisión's operations responded to the fact that there was no market for Mexican films in Latin America (Interview). In addition, Nuvisión never had an infrastructure to carry out its own distribution operation in Mexico.

Nuvisión began sharing distribution revenues at a very early stage. By 2000, Nuvisión had already reached a sub-distribution agreement with Televisa's Videocine ("Forman" 3). As Saldívar clarified, Nuvisión sub-contracted Videocine for a sub-distribution of *Del Olvido* due to Nuvisión's limited operation (Interview). This strategy would become counterproductive toward Estudios México's goals of circumventing distribution barriers, and banking the profits of vertical integration. In 2004, Nuvisión would leave the film distribution business unable to compete with a disadvantage. Estudios México, a studio-less film corporation, never was a vertical integrated film company with an efficient distribution arm. At times, the overarching power of large distribution corporations seems to reach all corners of distribution in Mexico.

Distribution barriers would seem almost insurmountable. By 2003, the momentum for Mexican cinema was fading out as producers realized the difficulties in making a profit in the challenging market structures of distribution and exhibition (Malkin 1). Members of the film community have highlighted a film business that favors transnational distributors and

exhibitors. The distribution of the box-office revenues assigns 51 percent to exhibitors, about 21 percent or more to distributors and the rest, between 9 to 17 percent to film producers after taxes (Tarifeño 49; Malkin 2). Some authors have explained that the vertically integrated Hollywood studios start making a profit through the distribution fees and financial charges (Hoskins et al. 58-59; Drake 79). The business is in distribution. The scheme in which box office revenues are split privileges the interests of distributors and exhibitors.

### **Nuvisión, *Del Olvido*, and strategies in film distribution.**

The distribution process of *Del Olvido* underwent its share of challenges and opportunities. Nuvisión would struggle for months in its search to find a convenient opening weekend for this documentary in a commercial theatrical circuit dominated by Hollywood distributors and their fictional products. In addition, this film distributor preferred to take a conservative approach in *Del Olvido*'s release in light of the challenging distribution and exhibition market. By pursuing that approach, Nuvisión implicitly reaffirmed the low expectations in the commercial viability and broad appeal of a documentary film. In contrast, a month earlier, Nuvisión had followed an aggressive distribution approach for another internationally awarded Mexican film, this time, a fictional piece: Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* (*Love is a bitch*, 2000). Considering Estudios México's interests, it was logical to distribute the hip Mexican urban drama/thriller *Amores Perros* widely. Yet, the low profile distribution scheme given to *Del olvido* underscored the different treatments Nuvisión would give to an artistic documentary film in comparison to a commercial feature film.

For *Del olvido*, Nuvisión only released ten prints and made a minimum investment in media promotion (Rulfo Interview). This strategy called *platforming*, used by specialty

distributors, intends to build awareness (word of mouth) about the film in key markets through a few film prints, and then distribute the film to other cities (Miller et al. 159). For *Amores Perros*, the film distributor populated more than two hundred prints nationwide in its opening weekend with the blessing of a well-orchestrated marketing campaign (Cázares Email). This wide release strategy is similar, but not quite as the film-print saturation mode or front-loading. The strategies raise the film's chances to make a profit, regardless of its marketability, and before "word of mouth kills the film at the box office" (Miller et al. 159). Screen saturation intends to reduce inherent risks in the uncertainty of the film business (nobody knows what audiences want) and maximize profits through economies of scale. It is a way to recoup the large investments made in production and distribution. However, the release of *Amores Perros* was still within the usual standards.

According to Altavista executive Maribel Cristóbal, *Del Olvido* circulated through Mexican movie theatres during 41 weeks, reaching 63,049 viewers, and recouping half of its \$300,000 investment<sup>8</sup> (Email). This documentary managed to achieve those numbers notwithstanding its limited distribution. According to Rulfo, sales in other markets would help *Del Olvido* to break even by 2003 (Interview). In its own economies of scale, *Del Olvido* proved to be commercially viable in the long run, mostly relying on word of mouth.

In 2000, *Del olvido* was only the fourth Mexican documentary that had secured commercial distribution since Roberto Rochín's *Ulama: el Juego de la Vida y la Muerte* (*Ulama: the Game of Life and Death*, 1986) was released at the end of 1988 when the State still owned the COTSA theatre chain. The other three documentary films that preceded *Del olvido* were released between 1995 and 1998. José Buil's *La Línea Paterna* (*The Paternal Line*, 1995) was commercially released in 1995. Daniel Goldberg's *Un Beso a esta Tierra* (*A*

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<sup>8</sup> According to IMCINE, *Del Olvido* made \$163,757 dollars at the box office.

*Kiss to this Land*, 1994), and Carlos Marcovich's *¿Quién Diablos es Juliette? (Who the Hell is Juliette?)*, 1996) reached the theatres in 1997 and 1998, respectively. Marcovich's documentary remains the most successful documentary at the box office in Mexican film history collecting \$282,185 with 101,094 viewers and 40 prints in seven weeks<sup>9</sup>. Its had a \$150,000 production budget ("Marcovich" 13). However, Mexican documentaries did not make it into distribution in the following two years. Within the scarce distribution opportunities for Mexican films, and even fewer for Mexican documentaries, Rulfo accomplished the difficult task of finding a distributor for *Del Olvido*, a documentary critics considered artistically and culturally relevant, but distributors looked down based on the same characteristics.

### **Distribution barriers: the State, Hollywood, and smoke screens**

Among informal and formal strategies that restrain national documentary distribution, the series of statements and preconceived notions that disregard documentaries for commercial distributions work in subtle, but effective ways against this group of films. The documentary film also has to overcome other barriers that affect most national films. As a preamble to discuss the arguments that derail the entrance of Mexican documentaries into commercial distribution, I will briefly refer to the negative role the State has played in national film production. Also, I will succinctly overview the many strategies involved in the sophisticated distribution and marketing of Hollywood films that dominate the market.

Hollywood majors dominate most international markets through their grip on distribution channels. However, the rising dominance of Hollywood distributors in Mexico has occurred under conditions that differ from other nations, including those in the Latin

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<sup>9</sup> Source: CANACINE.

America region. Governments in France, Spain, Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina have followed and implemented initiatives to support national film production and distribution, like tax incentives or a tax on movie tickets (Rosenberg 42; Taibo Factores 13-16; Falicov 266). In Mexico, the government has consistently stymied or canceled these measures attempting to preserve a neoliberal economy that favors corporations.

During the 2000s, three key instances serve as evidence of these hurdles. At the end of 2002, congress passed legislation that included a one peso box office tax intended to funnel monies to film funds FOPROCINE and FIDECINE to support national film production. During 2003, all Hollywood major distributors, and some national ones such as Videocine, Gussi, Nueva Era, and Nuvisión, sought to legally contest this tax. In 2004, the Supreme Court overturned the one-peso-per-ticket measure declaring this tax unconstitutional (Bensinger 16). IMCINE could have collected more than \$14 million dollars per year, enough to co-produce several films. The budget of a domestic production ranges around \$1 million.

In 2003, the Fox administration, the government that supposedly inaugurated a new democratic era in Mexico, intended to cut all funding to film institutions supported by the State. The executive branch proposal for the 2004 federal budget indicated no funding for IMCINE, the state film school Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (Film Training Center), CCC, and the state-run film studio facilities, Churubusco Studios (Rosenberg A42). A zero budget for these institutions meant privatizing them. The national film community came together mustering efforts to protest against these measures, and even found public support from international film institutions, schools, and filmmakers (Cruz; Olivares 1). The Mexican government would soon abandon this plan.

Under these conditions, the overwhelming presence of Hollywood distributors and their films, and those that follow similar formats, have substantially heightened in the 1990s

and the 2000s in comparison to their market share in previous decades (Sánchez Ruíz "Cine" 47-91). These practices have taken a toll on the degree of diversity found on Mexican marquees. Behind these practices lies the powerful clout of a dominant mode of production and distribution in the form of studio-produced features over less industrialized production modes with no commercial ties to distributors or exhibitors. Hollywood distribution branches dictate these practices, which some national producers and distributors, tend to replicate.

Authors like Miller et al. (2001) or Wildman and Siwek (1988) have analyzed the economic conditions as well as the production and marketing strategies that position the Hollywood majors at an advantage around the world. Here, I mostly rely on Hoskins et al. to provide an overview (Hoskins et. al 37-67). Hollywood majors enjoy competitive advantages in their domestic market, such as cultural barriers for foreign competitors, a large population and high per capita income. These characteristics allow studios to make large investments in production and distribution costs using economies of scale, which become economic entry barriers to newcomers. Moreover, the studios can make such large investments because they can break even in their own territory, focusing later on international markets to make a profit. Finally, the studios are vertically integrated companies with interests in production, distribution, and exhibition, taking advantage of ownership concentration in distribution channels.

As new technologies are developing additional windows for film distribution, the theatrical release has evolved into a still crucial, but short-lived launching point for the film distribution cycle. This has prompted Hollywood major distributors to deploy several vital strategies to reduce risks. They invest heavily in marketing campaigns, and a large release to saturate movie theatre screens in the opening weekend. Philip Drake calls this strategy “front-loading” (64). In this way, they can swiftly reap the profits. Film distributors can also

maximize film rental profits since rentals diminish as weeks go by in benefit of the exhibitor. As a side effect, these strategies shorten the theatrical exhibition window of any film.

In 2006, a distributor could “front-load” a film with 800 prints taking 20 percent of 3,900<sup>10</sup> screens available at the time in Mexico. That is the case of Ron Howard’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) distributed by Columbia-TriStar (Ugalde Interview). In Mexico, no more than 300 films are released during a year<sup>11</sup>, with 52 available weekends. While not all American films have such a large release, two Hollywood films per weekend could saturate the screens. Víctor Ugalde argues that with cascading releases only four or five Hollywood films could take over a 12-screen multiplex. If a national film enters the exhibition circuits, Hollywood distributors would press exhibitors to make room for their films. Hollywood films have only accounted for over 60 percent of total releases during the 1990s and early 2000s (Gómez "Impacto" 287). During the same period, the majors have consistently taken more than 80 percent of the revenues in the theatrical distribution markets, and their films have covered around 90 percent of screen time (Getino 129; Sánchez Ruíz "Cine" 62-63; Martínez Garza and Lozano 61). Lacking large marketing campaigns, and the power of word of mouth, national films struggle to remain on the marquees for more than one week.

The constant production of high-concept films, that is, the blockbuster and the likes backed up by pervasive marketing and distribution strategies give Hollywood distributors clout and leverage with exhibitors. In 1997, the average budget of a marketing campaign for a Hollywood film was around \$10 million (Hoskins et. al 56). In 2008, marketing costs are equivalent to a third of the total cost of a major’s film (Drake 63). In Mexico, Hollywood majors invest more than \$1.5 million in marketing, the equivalent of the average national

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<sup>10</sup> Source: IMCINE.

<sup>11</sup> Film released per year from 2000 to 2006: 241, 250, 260, 280, 278, 279, and 298. See IMCINE, *Cinema Mexico*, 146, and IMCINE, *Indicadores*.

film's budget (O'Boyle "Studios" 16). Mexican documentaries like *Del Olvido* depend on publicity, meaning film reviews and interviews, and word-of-mouth campaigns.

Based on their volume of film supply, Hollywood majors can negotiate favorable exhibition terms with national movie theatre chains, inhibiting the entrance of newcomers who cannot invest in lavish marketing campaigns, or count on a large release with hundreds of film prints (Christopherson 160). Competition is tough. Even Videocine and Gussi Artecinema, often acting as a mini-major, lost money in 2004-2006 (O'Boyle "Foreign" A22). Michael O'Boyle, *Variety's* reporter for on the Mexican film industry, notes that majors' releases usually eliminate Mexican films from movie theatre screens when they have no marketing power (publicity and prints) and national distributors lack Hollywood majors' negotiating leverage ("Studios" 16). Thus, a word of mouth strategy is difficult to achieve.

Hollywood distributors also use other tactics to press exhibitors. According to Víctor Ugalde, head of FIDECINE film fund, the majors do practice block-booking, but no trace is left behind (Interview). Some scholars have mentioned that, outside of the United States, the majors engage in block-booking as a common practice in Latin American and the rest of the world (Johnson 207; Miller et al. 151). This practice means offering exhibitors a blockbuster only if they take other less attractive movies. A comment made by Miguel Ángel Dávila in 2003, then head of Cinemex, confirms that idea. During an interview, Dávila conceded that Cinemex would take any film offered by Hollywood distributors due to their established commercial relations (Interview). This explains the saturations of screens in Mexico where distributors are fighting for a slot every weekend with only 52 per year.

New national distributors often enter the market at a disadvantage with a limited operation and with a small portfolio of films. During the 1995-2006 period, more than twenty film companies participated in film distribution with a least one film during those years



(Sánchez Ruíz "Cine" 65; Ayala; Taibo Factores 6). According to film executive Efrén Saldívar, “a distributor with one film is nothing in this business” (Interview). However, one of the major hurdles Mexican documentaries have to confront is the series of statements from distributors and exhibitors that build a discourse that disdains the entrance of national documentaries into commercial distribution.

Some film executives, distributors, and critics have engaged in the propagation of a discourse that intends to delegitimize documentaries for theatrical distribution. Some have explained Hollywood’s success only in terms of production values and, like Jack Valenti sustained for years, the idea of simply making “movies people want to see” (qtd. in Rooney 6). However, the fact is that Hollywood majors not only enjoy economic advantages, but also have the control of the distribution channels (Hoskins et al. 37-68; Miller et al. 146-70). Both circumstances secure their dominant position in film markets around the globe.

Somehow, the documentary has acquired a negative connotation from previous trends in documentary filmmaking practices. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá has said that “a prejudice or a stereotype is mistaken for the Latin American documentary, identified with a militant film, poorly made and improvised, Manichean and crude, lacking structure and originality” (16). Mexican documentary filmmaker Manuel Michel described in similar terms Mexican documentaries shown in movie theatres in the 1960s when these films were mostly short pieces used as previews before the main show. Michel said: “It is considered ... as a filler for the film programs ... a marginal cinema ... subordinated to absurd interests, and poor distribution, badly made and boring ... 90 percent of the shorts made in Mexico are of propagandistic nature” (73). After 40 years, some things remain the same while others, including many Mexican documentaries, have changed. The prejudice mentioned by Paranaguá relies on a broad generalization that fails to acknowledge the subject-matter

relevance and audiovisual achievements of traditional documentaries, and especially the innovative approaches of recent documentaries. Yet, a few examples will show how those prejudices still work today as barriers that national documentaries face in their own territory.

For instance, during an interview, Gussi Artecinema executive Armando García said that no one makes money with a documentary, especially with a four-print release (Phone Interview). García pointed out that movies was a family entertainment business. He posed a rhetorical question. “Would you take your wife and kids to see *Happy Feet*<sup>12</sup> or the documentary *Gabriel Orozco*<sup>13</sup>?” However, García neglected to consider genres such as horror films or dramas, not necessarily suitable for the whole family.

According to Videocine executive Luis Ruiz, Videocine does not acquire distribution rights for documentaries because these products do not attract an audience to movie theatres (Email). Without providing specific details, Ruiz explains that Videocine carries a portfolio of commercial films, and that is the only criteria they have to select a film for distribution: that the film has commercial appeal. To explain why Videocine distributed Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)<sup>14</sup>, Ruiz responded that this film was treated as a commercial movie and not as a documentary. He pointed out that at one moment filmmaker and film became a topical issue. Finally, Ruiz also affirmed that documentary distribution confronts low levels of education (cultural capital) in Mexico. Juan Carlos Rulfo has contested this argument by highlighting that the viewer does not need to know any specific information to enjoy a documentary like *Del Olvido* (Interview). In agreement with Ruiz, Columbia-TriStar executive Valeria Bortoni said that this film distributor only carries commercial films, and never documentaries. When I mentioned Columbia distributed the documentary *Alex Lora*,

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<sup>12</sup> George Miller and others directed *Happy Feet* (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Juan Carlos Martin directed *Gabriel Orozco* (2001) about a Mexican modern artist.

<sup>14</sup> This documentary was released with 162 prints, reaching 692,111 viewers, making over 2.5 million dollars with 4,272 viewers per print. *Del olvido* had 4,730 viewers per print. Source: IMCINE.

*Esclavo del Rock and Roll* (Alex Lora, *Rock and Roll Slave*, 2002)<sup>15</sup>, she replied Alex Lora was never considered a documentary, only a movie (Phone Interview).

These statements reveal some of the contradictions in documentary distribution. These commercial distributors continue to build a discourse that describes documentaries as films that lack large audience appeal. However, when a documentary seems to have the potential of convoking audiences to movie theatres, then they become something other than a documentary as if documentaries cannot have that type of attribute.

Alfonso López, head of the small national distributor Alfhville, also offered a broad generalization: “Nobody is interested in the film distribution of any documentary, either Mexican or foreign”. He added, “The problem is its commercial value.” Then, López tried to clarify his point. “These are very valuable productions – he said – but you cannot invest in marketing, because of their meager profits”. However, Alfhville distributed Marcela Arteaga’s *Recuerdos*. This documentary resorts to magnificent camerawork and poetic re-enactments to trace the life of an immigrant Jewish filmmaker who resided in Mexico. The film expands to focus on Jewish migration during the Spanish Civil War and World Word II.

López notes that in recent years it is easier to locate documentaries on movie theatre screens. However, he mentions that some of the most popular documentaries revolve around controversial issues or try to create a polemic, such as Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), or Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* (2004). He contrasts *Fahrenheit 9/11* to documentaries such as *Promises* (2001) directed by Justin Shapiro, B.Z. Goldberg, and Mexican filmmaker Carlos Bolado. According to López, documentaries like *Promises* cover topics that are relevant, but less known to the public. López acknowledges *Promises* and *Del Olvido* attracted an audience and remained on screens for months with a limited

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<sup>15</sup> *Alex Lora* was released with 200 prints, reached 89,313 viewers, making over \$200,000 with 823 viewers per print. Source: IMCINE.

release and scarce promotion. Alfonso López was working in Nuvisión when this distributor released these films. López argues that the relative success of these documentaries has to do with an audience more willing today to see these films at a movie theatre than before. *Promises* and *Del Olvido* reached the movie theatres before the release of *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *Super Size Me*. This fact is relevant to avoid an easy argument that identifies Moore's films as the only reason behind a relative surge in documentary distribution and exhibition in the global film industry.

Once in a while, some film critics reformulate part of this negative discourse around the documentary form in their film reviews. For instance, after watching *La Línea Paterna*, film critic Tomás Pérez Turrent writes: “[*La Línea Paterna*] ...is a film that has mistakenly been described as a documentary, but it does not resembles anything made in Mexico before ... it has nothing to do with other documentary films ...” (“Línea” 18). This documentary compiles family movies filmed in a 9.5mm Pathé-Baby film camera by a Spanish immigrant physician during the 1920s and 1930s. Instead of highlighting this documentary as evidence of the diversity and malleability of the documentary genre, Pérez Turrent argues that this film must be something other than a documentary as if this genre cannot be engaging, and entertaining. In another film review, Eduardo Alvarado classifies *Del Olvido*, among the “difficult films” of year 2000 that found a good response from an audience eager to find new artistic proposals (“Renace” 2). By “difficult,” Alvarado means alternative cinema, films with an artistic emphasis or conceptual films. Film critic Luis Tovar plainly ignores *Del Olvido* when he writes about Mexican films available on movie theatres in June 2000. Tovar explains he will not review *Del Olvido* since this film's style and thematic has nothing to do with commercially competitive cinema (Tovar). Clearly, the ambiguity in Pérez Turrent and Alvarado is less harmful than the sheer scorn shown in Tovar's critique.

FIDECINE top executive Víctor Ugalde asserts that Mexico does have an education problem that complicates the consumption of documentaries at movie theatres. He says that “documentary consumption is directly proportional to education” (Interview). What Ugalde tries to suggest is that viewers in Mexico lack enough cultural capital to appreciate these films. For this film official, it is a matter of familiarizing audiences with the documentary genre. However, no cultural policy in Mexico promotes or supports a consistent distribution and exhibition of documentaries.

Through those arguments aforementioned, two main ideas stand out. Some critics have a hard time changing their presuppositions about what a documentary is. Second, there is an idea that Mexican audiences require a specific knowledge to appreciate documentaries, a cultural capital. However, many documentaries cover popular topics or current events while others, if artistic, also present their contents in a very accessible manner such as Rulfo’s *Del Olvido* and *En el Hoyo*. In addition, current audiences are formed by young viewers from middle and upper classes with a higher level of education than before (Mantecón 2). Thus, the low-education-level argument is problematic to a certain degree. Ugalde has a more plausible argument when he points out a lack of familiarity with the genre and the scarce practice of watching documentaries. This is not a specialized code, a limited cultural capital, to read a documentary, but a more general knowledge, about what a documentary could be.

### **Juan Carlos Rulfo, *La Media Luna* and *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo***

Four main elements have worked as informal and formal strategies to construct recognition around *Del Olvido* as a way to enter in a challenging film industry. These strategies show tensions between Rulfo’s cultural goals and the economic demands of the film industry. First, Juan Carlos Rulfo intends to build his own prestige through his

documentary films, but he intentionally or not, relies on the iconic figure of his father, the renowned writer, Juan Rulfo, a writer that influenced other writers like Gabriel García Márquez. In this sense, Juan Carlos Rulfo has simultaneously enjoyed and struggled with the prerogatives and expectations of being the youngest son of the late Juan Rulfo. Even though this fact does say something about who obtains support for documentary production and distribution in Mexico, Rulfo like any other documentary filmmaker in Mexico has also faced many obstacles in his trajectory. Some journalists have suggested that carrying the last name of this famous writer must have been more of a burden than a privilege (Galicia "Juan Carlos" 5B; Solórzano 12). In this sense, Juan Carlos Rulfo has taken an ambivalent position. While the legacy of Juan Rulfo conferred *Del Olvido* with an artistic quality, Juan Carlos Rulfo has tried to take a distance from the image of the celebrated writer.

In *Del Olvido*, Rulfo, the documentary filmmaker, only used the reference of Juan Rulfo, the writer, mostly as an excuse to divert to other stories and themes. Those maneuvers are part of Juan Carlos Rulfo's approach to disengage from the weight of his father's prestige to construct one of his own (Alvarado "No escuchas" 2E; Bertrán 1). However, these efforts reveal tensions and contradictions in his approach. When Juan Carlos Rulfo documents his search for his origins, this operation unavoidably touches upon a familiar subject with cultural resonance in Mexico and around the world: Juan Rulfo, the literary icon, and his acclaimed short novel, *Pedro Páramo* (1955).

The first two documentaries Juan Carlos Rulfo directed are part of a search for his roots. After the death of his father in 1986, and as an anecdote that shares similarities with the story in *Pedro Páramo*, Juan Carlos Rulfo follows his mother's suggestion to visit his relatives, before they die, in Llano Grande, Jalisco. Nobody among the villagers knows much about Juan Rulfo, but they do remember his grandfather Cheno and how he was killed in

1923 (Peguero 25). Thus, Juan Carlos Rulfo decides to make *El Abuelo Cheno y Otras Historias* (*Grandfather Cheno and Other Stories*, 1994). This documentary won an Ariel award, the Mexican equivalent to an Oscar, for best short documentary film in 1996. The documentary also traveled around international film festivals. *El Abuelo Cheno* was already positioning Juan Carlos Rulfo as a respected filmmaker. After the production of *El Abuelo Cheno*, Juan Carlos Rulfo makes a second try in his quest to reconstruct his father's past. Now, Rulfo pursues the production of *Los Caminos de Don Juan*, a documentary that follows the journeys of Juan Rulfo.

As a second strategy, Rulfo established a his own production company, La Media Luna Producciones, in 1995 to produce his first feature-length film, *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo* ([lamedialuna.com](http://lamedialuna.com)). La Media Luna is the mythical name of the hacienda that belonged to the character that gives name to Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo*. Through La Media Luna, Rulfo was able to gather funding from private and public entities. *Del olvido al no Me Acuerdo* was far from being a film production in line with commercial cinema. Public and private funds supported *Del Olvido*'s production during almost three years starting in 1995, right after the 1994 economic crisis, and through the period of scarce support from the State for film production, 1995-1998.

Rulfo managed to amass funding that added up around \$300,000 dollars. Even if the budget was below half a million dollars, the project required a mix of cultural and government institutions, state-owned and private companies to complete up its production. More than eight entities were involved backing *Del Olvido*. Some producers are IMCINE, the State of Colima's Department of Culture, the Rockefeller and MacArthur Foundation, Comisión Federal de Electricidad (Federal Electricity Commission), Fundación Juan Rulfo,

and Producciones x Marca<sup>16</sup>. Rulfo described these production strategies as non-traditional mechanism to finance a film (Galicia "Luego" 5B). Rulfo pointed out that the lack of financial resources to produce a film had pushed Mexican productions toward new filmmaking practices. These alternative financial strategies underscore *Del Olvido*'s attributes as a cultural endeavor.

In this respect, these entities were not interested in *Del Olvido*'s commercial viability, but on its cultural dimension. Rulfo's disposition to make documentary films shows an interest in a film practice that departs from commercial standards. In this sense, Rulfo makes films he conceives without trying to fit into commercial molds. Yet, Rulfo seeks commercial distribution an opportunity to reach a wide audience, consolidate prestige, and at least partially, sustain his film production. Once, Juan Carlos Rulfo described his documentary as "not very commercial" while welcoming the interest of Mexican companies in this kind of cinema (qtd. in Lazcano "Explora" 2). In that comment, Rulfo showed he was reluctant to position his film completely outside the commercial realm of films as the phrase "not very commercial" suggests that the film did have a commercial appeal. The project that IMCINE backed up in early 1996 under the name of *Los caminos de don Juan* was completed by March 1999 with its official name *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo*.

As a third strategy, Juan Carlos Rulfo found in film festivals a site whereby to achieve artistic recognition and eventually commercial distribution. *Del Olvido* participated in several film festivals and other film competitions for more than a year. During those months, *Del Olvido* garnered film awards and critical praise, which granted this film with artistic recognition and public notoriety, that is, symbolic capital. Marijke de Valck notes that

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<sup>16</sup> Other producers are the State of Jalisco's government, the Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA or National Fund for Culture and Arts), Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México (National Railroads of Mexico), and the Universidad de Guadalajara.



while film festivals recognize films as cultural expressions, they can also convert that symbolic capital into an economic one, especially for films with “cross-over appeal” (119-20). Within the international film festival circuit and other film competitions, *Del Olvido* received more than fifteen awards and nomination between 1999 and 2001. In the XIV Muestra de Cine Mexicano de Guadalajara, *Del Olvido* received a Special Mention within the category of Best Opera Prima in March 1999. Five months later, in September 1999, came the first prominent international award: Best First Work award at the 1999 Montreal World Film Festival. By the end of that month, *Del Olvido* won its second international recognition: the Best First Work award at the Festival International Du Film Du Biarritz. In October 1999, Nuvisión had already picked up *Del Olvido* for theatrical distribution. At that time, *Del Olvido* had garnered one national and two international awards.

If these awards contributed to Nuvisión’s decision to take *Del Olvido* for commercial distribution, that contribution was minor. Juan Carlos Rulfo has suggested that the fact he had connections with these distributors may have played a larger role in convincing Nuvisión to distribute his documentary (Interview). However, as an emerging new distributor, Nuvisión would not have taken a risk with a film without luster. Later, I will discuss in more detail the tensions around Nuvisión’s decision to pick *Del olvido* for distribution. At the moment, suffice it to say that this decision also helped Nuvisión in consolidating its prestige as a national distributor supporting national film productions with cultural and artistic relevance.

Once Rulfo had found a distributor, film festivals became an opportunity to build awareness around *Del Olvido* for promotional purposes. With more film festivals in *Del Olvido*’s schedule in 2000, including Sundance, it makes sense that Nuvisión would wait to release this film later. Yet, Rulfo kept announcing and postponing *Del Olvido*’s release through the press since October 1999. More than a planned strategy, this was more a

consequence of the difficulties in finding an opening weekend in a saturated film market like the one in Mexico.

*Del Olvido* also received seven nominations in the 2000 Arieles edition, the awards bestowed by the Mexican Film Academy. These nominations were announced a month before this documentary's theatrical release date. This was perfect timing to increase audiences' expectations to see this film. Moreover, almost three weeks after its opening date, *Del Olvido* won four of those nominations: Best Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Sound and Best First Work. The Mexican Film Academy would also select *Del Olvido* to represent Mexican cinema in Spain at the Goyas awards ceremony.

Film festivals also gave *Del Olvido* a continuous presence on the press. Articles would trace the trajectory of *Del Olvido* through film festivals as this documentary was gathering accolades and achieving artistic recognition. *Del Olvido*'s press coverage continued even after this documentary already had a distributor. Print media coverage's function was twofold: as a site to assign artistic value to *Del Olvido* and as a promotional device.

Sparsely disseminated in print media since 1998, articles, reviews, and promotional notes on *Del Olvido* continued to make a connection between Rulfo's narrative and Rulfo's documentaries. These reviews are mostly favorable to the film. Most of them disperse their attention between the Rulfian motifs in the documentary and Juan Carlos Rulfo's personal style. Some use a poetic tone to discuss the film while a few more clearly put aside the myth of Juan Rulfo to situate *Del Olvido* at the core of their comments. The majority of these reviews appeared in print media at three moments: as *Del Olvido* participated in film festivals, during the premier of the film at the Cineteca Nacional in June 2000, and around the commercial release of the film the following month.

Film critics have seized many opportunities to refer to Juan Rulfo while constructing an analysis on Juan Carlos Rulfo's *Del Olvido*. Through this association, they have conferred *Del Olvido* with an aura of prestige that owes an artistic debt to Juan Rulfo. For instance, film critic Ernesto Diezmartínez identifies a Rulfian scenario when he comments on how Juan Carlos Rulfo uses as a voice over narration an audio recording of his father reading his collection of short stories, *El Llano en Llamas* (*The Burning Plan*, 1953). Diezmartínez describes how Juan Rulfo's voice accompanies a flying camera over Jalisco state's arid plains as the viewers sees "the ghost towns of the literary world and the real world" (21). Toward the end of his article, this critic returns his interest to Juan Carlos Rulfo's filmmaking craft as he notices that what matters to the filmmaker and his viewers is how those elderly villagers tell their stories.

The risk in this type of criticism is that of making prominent the image of Juan Rulfo. Rulfo, the filmmaker, believes that the image of Rulfo, the writer, is so overwhelming that it could overshadow the documentary's merits in terms of content and style (qtd. in Puig 74). When critics argue that the film is a re-articulation of Juan Rulfo's narrative in a visual form, that criticism runs the risk of overlooking *Del Olvido*'s own qualities.

Some film critics do center their attention on *Del Olvido* by separating this documentary from an assumed Rulfian mythology. As an example, Fernanda Solórzano considers that the elderly peasants in this documentary had nothing to do with those in *El Llano en Llamas* (12). Her comment avoids the recurrent connection between author and filmmaker that other critics resort to in their analyses.

Rulfo's fourth strategy toward commercial distribution became clear when he found in press coverage a way to establish his own territory as documentary filmmaker. Through film reviews and interviews, Rulfo articulated a discourse that defined *Del Olvido* as a new

cinematic form, different from fiction and the documentary. Film critics and Juan Carlos Rulfo attuned their views to describe *Del Olvido* not as a documentary, but almost as a new genre blurring boundaries between documentary and fiction. Planned or not, that discourse intended to distance *Del Olvido* from any possible prejudice that audiences or exhibitors could hold against the documentary form. However, this same discourse becomes problematic since it appears as if Rulfo does not attempt to revalorize the documentary genre, but break away from it. As a contradiction, the strategy ends up reaffirming negative connotations around the documentary.

In *Del Olvido*, Rulfo has ventured with a playful approach to the documentary form. To accomplish this, Rulfo relies on a series of cinematic devices to carefully achieve a visual style that contributes to structure a loose narrative. With the help of his cinematographer, Federico Barbabosa, and his co-editor Ramón Cervantes, Rulfo selects carefully framed images supported by time-lapse cinematography, jump cuts, slow motion, and grand angular shots to present the documentary form anew. Film critics like Nelson Carro has praised *Del olvido* for these artistic innovations. Carro has not only noticed Rulfo's efforts to go beyond the "simple record" of a reality as in an *objective* documentary, but he also found in this film an observation on the documentary genre: a long-lived form, a privileged witness, still young to take risks (2). This criticism was relevant to position Juan Carlos Rulfo as a filmmaker not afraid to break with the already-established filmmaking traditions.

In many interviews, prior and around *Del Olvido*'s theatrical release, Juan Carlos Rulfo called attention to a few Mexican films that departed from traditional approaches of filmmaking. He referred to Carlos Marcovich's documentary *¿Y Quién Diablos es Juliette?*, and Carlos Bolado's *Bajo California* (1999), a hybrid film with fictional and non-fictional elements, as alternative avenues to reinvigorate Mexican cinema. Rulfo pointed out that

Mexican audiences had shown interests in seeing a new type of films like the ones aforementioned (Riquer 10). Around 2000, Rulfo considered that audiences were ready for new approaches in Mexican cinema, but the challenge was on the filmmakers' side. During an interview, Rulfo described his own cinematic project. Rulfo said Mexican filmmakers should strive to make films which could concurrently be entertaining and skillfully assembled, meaningful in content, with a wide audience appeal, tremendously Mexican in their roots while at the same universal in their themes (Interview). This conception of a new Mexican cinema reveals Rulfo's interest in experimenting with film in a manner that would transgress genres and formulas.

According to Rulfo, *Del Olvido* is not a documentary, but something new, a film that blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction. At least that was his discourse during the promotion of his film. Although Rulfo's vision is relevant, he was so adamant to convey the notion that *Del Olvido* departed from the documentary form that at times it seemed as this filmmaker was trying to take a distance from this genre. This discourse served as a strategy to persuade an audience that his film was not a dense and boring movie. However, this discourse could also be interpreted as Rulfo's attempt to find an audience in the commercial circuits.

Rulfo's comments reveal the kind of tensions that emerge when artistic or cultural interests overlap, converge or clash with commercial ones. Part of Juan Carlos Rulfo's discourse about his vision of cinema replicates negative views on documentaries that have hampered their distribution. On the positive side, Rulfo builds this argument to break distribution barriers. This is his attempt to mobilize a certain kind of documentary toward theatrical distribution. However, he reformulates a documentary that departs from traditional forms and in the process becomes fiction. Under that vision, documentaries are left behind to pave the way for another form with a broader commercial appeal: Rulfo's *docuficción*.

*Docuficción*<sup>17</sup> is a concept Juan Carlos Rulfo used during *Del Olvido*'s promotional campaign in the press. Rulfo applies the term *docuficción* to *Del Olvido* as he considers this film moves away from exhausted film formulas, especially commercial fiction films, but also from documentaries that tend to be tedious, dense, and boring (qtd. in Suárez n. p.). Rulfo has nurtured this approach since *El Abuelo Cheno*. Basically, this filmmaker argues that he can construct a fiction through a narrative structure based on real-life characters and the stories they tell to the camera. Those stories would work like a series of tales.

In the case of *Del Olvido*, since the elderly characters struggle to seize their elusive memories, what they recall turns into fiction. In this sense, the absence of veracity becomes an excuse for Rulfo to claim that *Del Olvido* is not a documentary in the traditional form. He has boasted that this film is a lie and non-informative, opposite to the general idea of what documentaries are (Bertrán 1; Puig 73; Peguero 25). Yet, this is not a *faux-documentary*: a fiction that recreates non-fiction. His film intends to move the notion of the traditional documentary to the realm of fictional narrative. This strategy functions as a solution to eliminate the idea that this is, in fact, a documentary, at least, in the traditional sense.

Film critics have tended to attune their comments with Rulfo's vision reinforcing his position as a risk-taker and an innovator. Yet, they also identify the traits of the documentary form in this film. For instance, although Tomás Pérez Turrent describes as fiction those moments when the villagers hesitate in their stories as they immerse in oblivion, he points out that the documentary techniques in *Del Olvido* are clearly identifiable ("Del Olvido" 2).

Another film critic, Fidel del Moral, affirms that *Del Olvido* does not fit in any genre, yet he admits that the first impression is that it belongs to the documentary genre (E2). Eduardo

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to distinguish the term *docuficción* from the English term *docudrama*. The former is a documentary that suggests the construction of a fiction narrative. The latter is fiction based on real facts. To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to note that in English the adjective precedes the noun and in Spanish, the opposite occurs.

Alvarado notes that the testimonials of renowned writers, the talking heads in *Del Olvido*, belong to the rigorous documentary form while the imaginative stories by the elderly villagers are part of a pseudo documentary: free, chaotic and poetic ("En busca" 4E).

The fact that several critics coincide with Juan Carlos Rulfo's argument suggests that the filmmaker's own argumentation could have influenced these film critics. After watching *Del Olvido* several times, the notion of that the documentary is creating fictions is not as prominent as the stylized attributes in its edition and cinematography. However, it is relevant to note that the film festival at Montreal bestowed *Del Olvido* with an award usually conferred to fiction films. In addition, the 2000 Ariel awards nominated *Del Olvido* for seven categories, but the Mexican film academy declared deserted the category for feature-length documentary.

Rulfo intends to use *docuficción* as a concept whereby to de-emphasize the boundaries between genres while moving documentaries closer to the fiction side, the dominant mode of commercial distribution. *Docuficción*, as a contestation to form, resonates with the notion of blurred boundaries between fiction and non-fiction discussed by Bill Nichols (Blurred x). Using this term to describe a certain type of ambiguous film not only points to an idea of innovation, but also one that erases the negative connotations in the word *documentary*. This strategy signals the concerns this filmmaker has on the prejudice that surrounds the documentary genre. From his point of view, describing a film as a documentary already suggests to the viewer the idea of a boring film that demands from the viewer a cultural capital, a previous knowledge, to understand the movie (Interview). In the end, Rulfo's vision ends up reproducing the negative discourse that has affected the documentary genre. In his thrust toward creative innovation, *Del Olvido's* film director suggests that the information-oriented documentaries that follow a more traditional format are better suited for

television (Alvarado "No escuchas" 2E). Thus, Rulfo brandishes the term *docuficción* as an equalizer between these two main cinematic forms. In his argumentation, he implicitly acknowledges a prejudice against the documentary genre. Instead of explicitly revalorizing the genre, Rulfo proposes a total transformation, leaving behind the documentary form and its baggage to enter into commercial distribution

### **Tensions in *Del Olvido*'s distribution**

The reasons behind Nuvisión's choice of *Del Olvido* for commercial distribution indicate tensions between cultural and economic interests. During a conversation in 2003, Juan Carlos Rulfo wondered whether Nuvisión would have picked up *Del Olvido* for distribution if he had not had a previously established good relationship with this distributor (Interview). Rulfo ponders if *Del Olvido* was the kind of film that would have appealed to a distributor like Nuvisión, with a portfolio that included Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Amores Perros*. However, Estudios México executives had already set among its goals to support Mexican film productions, which would have commercial appeal without excluding artistic risks. Information from parent company CIE, highlighted Nuvisión's commitment to support Mexican films with commercial, but also artistic attributes (CIE "Producción"). Nuvisión would prove through the years a hybrid approach that would combine films like Nancy Meyers's *What Women Want* (2000) with Gerardo Tort's *De la Calle* (*Streeters*, 2001). Yet, Nuvisión joined the majors, Videocine and Nueva Era, to legally contest the one-peso tax on box office tickets to fund Mexican film productions.

The discourse around documentary distribution emerges as part of an argument to explain Nuvisión's acquisition of *Del Olvido*. Altavista Films executive Efrén Saldívar



affirms that Nuvisión took *Del Olvido* as a special agreement since this type of cinema does not make a profit (Interview). Saldívar explains that while commercial films usually receive royalties upfront, a guarantee, *Del Olvido* received none. Videocine covered its overhead, prints and promotions, and charged a distribution fee before net profits could be considered. Saldívar continues to explain that distributors choose a film based on an identifiable genre, movie stars, and marketing campaign. According to Saldívar, Nuvisión launched a limited release, because the distributors never expected to make a profit.

Once Juan Carlos Rulfo said he wished *Del Olvido* could have received a promotional campaign as effective as the one devised by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez for their *faux* documentary *The Blair Witch Project*, also distributed by Nuvisión in 1999 (qtd. in M. Fuentes 2). In those comments, Juan Carlos Rulfo was expressing his frustration with the minimum promotion his documentary had received due to a lack of resources and a limited theatrical release. He was also implying that a creative promotional campaign does not demand a high investment in marketing costs. In 2003, Rulfo considered that distributors in Mexico lack an understanding of the documentary form and an expertise when dealing with their distribution (Interview). When Nuvisión staff asked Juan Carlos Rulfo how could they market his documentary, the filmmaker was appalled. Rulfo thought the obvious: “They are the one who should answer those questions” (Interview). Later, as if he had no distributor, Rulfo would tour the movie theatres where his documentary was playing to make sure everything was going well. As Víctor Ugalde points out, filmmakers in Mexico had to be involved in all phases of their films’ life cycle (Interview).

Rulfo has said that Columbia-TriStar’s approach to documentary distribution shows a lack of understanding and expertise in distributors when it comes to handling a documentary for distribution (Interview). Despite its wide 200-print release, the documentary barely drew

447 viewers per print (IMCINE Exhibición). Columbi-TriStar marketed the *Alex Lora* documentary under sheer commercial criteria. Rulfo means that the distributor did not consider audience trends, or bestowing prestige upon the film. Most fans of this Mexican rock star are from popular classes. Today, cinema going is an expensive form of entertainment in Mexico, catered to middle and upper classes. In addition, the documentary had not fared well in festival venues like the Guadalajara film festival. These problems in documentary distribution can be found in the distribution of other Mexican documentaries.

### **The reality of other Mexican documentaries**

After *Del Olvido*'s commercial release, 12 documentaries slowly seized a few screens at the multiplexes. From 2000 to 2005, only five of them were released. In 2006, only six national documentaries were programmed on commercial marquees. The number of prints per release averaged 24. However, if this calculation leaves aside the 200-print release of *Alex Lora*, that average drops to 8.7 prints per copy. Two documentaries only circulated with one print. One of them was Alejandra Islas's *Muxes*, which found in the *Lumière* theatres an ally willing to project her documentary on video.

In 2003, several documentaries grabbed the attention of film officials, filmmakers, and critics at the annual international film festival in Guadalajara. In the official section of Mexican films that year, the documentaries *Recuerdos* by Marcela Arteaga, and *La Pasión de María Elena* (*The Passion of María Elena*, 2003) by Mercedes Moncada won the prestigious Mayahuel award for best Mexican feature film (ex aequo), among several fiction and non-fiction works. The previous year, another documentary had also won the Mayahuel for best film in the Mexican section: Juan Carlos Martín's *Gabriel Orozco*. In addition, Everardo González's *La Canción del Pulque* (*Pulque Song*, 2002), garnered two Mayahuel awards: one

for Best Editing and another one for Best Cinematography. Luis Kelly came empty handed with no awards for *Alex Lora: Esclavo del Rock and Roll*. In an alternative venue, Gregorio Rocha showed his documentary *Los Rollos Perdidos de Pancho Villa (The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa, 2003)*. The documentary is Rocha's quest for the legendary film in which Pancho Villa participated for the American Mutual Film Company.

From those film mentioned, only *Gabriel Orozco, Recuerdos, La Canción del Pulque*, and the award-less *Alex Lora* would find commercial distribution. *Gabriel Orozco* was poorly released with three prints by the small distributor Zima on 2004. Columbia-TriStar launched a wide a 200-print release for *Alex Lora*, but it performed poorly per print. Alhaville would give a limited-release of four prints to *Recuerdos* in 2006, three years after receiving its *Mayahuel* when the attention had faded out. González's *La Canción* would have to wait another year to be shown on only three screens in 2007. Rocha would prefer to establish with some friends his own video distribution channel, Subcine, to distribute his documentary in the United States. From these documentaries, I want briefly touch upon *Recuerdos* and another documentary that came two years later, Antonino Isordia's *1973* (2005). Basically, Arteaga and Isordia experienced a series of problems that underscore the need for filmmakers to become somehow part of the distribution process of their films, if they want to see them on the screen.

Arteaga has information that reveals that several screenings of her documentary were canceled. Her film was released along with *The Da Vinci Code*, May 19 2006. In Mexico, *The Da Vinci Code* launched the largest front-loading release ever: 800 prints, taking 20 percent of movie theatres. Arteaga documented instances in which exhibitors canceled or almost canceled the screening of her documentary For instance, at Cinépolis Diana theatres, box office tellers were informing the audience that *Recuerdos* was sold out for all its shows.

This would not only contradict the low final numbers *Recuerdos* achieved<sup>18</sup>, but also its prompt disappearance from theatres the following weekend to make room for a new *X-Men* movie. Arteaga believes that Alfhaville did not care about the theatrical release, but was hoping to make a profit in the long run through DVD sales (Interview). With only one week in movie theatres and under those conditions, *Recuerdos* became the Mexican documentary that drew the lowest rate of viewers per copy: 259. In comparison, *Del Olvido* drew in 4,730 spectators per print. *Recuerdos* was ensnared in a poor distribution strategy that is a consequence of the dynamics going on in film distribution in Mexico.

The limited release Antonino Isordia's *1973* received also reveals those and other problems in the distribution of national documentaries in Mexico. Antonino Isordia's *1973* is the terrifying portrayal of three outcasts from society who were all born in 1973 as the filmmaker. The triptych captures the shattered lives of these middle-class characters, lost through ambition, self-destruction, and matricide. Two of them are in jail. One recollects with details but no remorse how he killed all members of his family. Isordia has described his documentary as a horror film. His documentary won the JVC film award at the 2005 Guadalajara international film festival, and the film critic's award called *Diosa de Plata*. Right away, the documentary grabbed the attention of a new upstart film distributor, Balius.

Previously, Isordia had contacted all major distributors and Videocine showing them the film reviews written by many critics during *1973*'s journey through film festivals as he was trying to convince them to watch his documentary (Interview). None of them were interested. Later, Filmhouse, another national distributor, expressed interest in distributing this documentary. However, Isordia points out that Filmhouse did not want to cover all the expenses, arguing the risks in competing for a few open dates in a busy schedule of 52

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<sup>18</sup> IMCINE reports *Recuerdos* had 1,035 viewers in one week.

weekends. Filmhouse executives also mentioned that they were simply trying to support national production rather than making a profit. Then, Filmhouse executives lectured Isordia on the many hurdles in film distribution in Mexico (Interview). Isordia would learn more during the process as *Balius* was going through a series of mishaps.

Isordia learned about how tough is to maintain a film on the marquee as Hollywood films are saturating the screens every weekend. Then, he was informed about block-booking, the undocumented practice, this time under the euphemism of *contrato de audiencia* or audience contract. In addition, Isordia realized that first exhibitors and distributors have to take their share before the producer can see a penny. To keep track of revenues, Isordia also had to pay an expensive fee to Nielsen EDI, a company that reports box office information. The young documentary filmmaker became involved in negotiating the terms of his distribution. With help of his producers, Isordia managed to convince Cinemex to take eight prints. However, *Balius* did very little in marketing this documentary, thus, sinking *1973*'s release. *Balius* could not set a specific play date with exhibitors. *1973* had literally no promotion as the trailer only played one week before the release of this documentary, and press coverage was minimum.

### ***En el Hoyo: now playing in theatres***

When the time came to distribute *En el Hoyo*, Juan Carlos Rulfo's second feature-length documentary, the filmmaker and his team at La Media Luna Producciones had already learned many lessons about documentary distribution through their experiences with *Del Olvido*. The fact that Nuvisión was no longer around was a sign of the difficulties in commercial distribution for national film producers and distributors. Rulfo and his producers at La Media Luna, among them Eugenia Montiel, made the decision to deal with distribution

on their own terms. For most part of this process, *En el Hoyo* not simply replicated, but also enhanced, those practices already employed in *Del Olvido*'s distribution.

Two distinctive characteristics set *En el Hoyo*'s distribution apart from the one applied to *Del olvido*. During an interview at La Media Luna's small offices, Eugenia Montiel highlights these two main aspects. One of them was a better orchestrated effort in media promotion, and public relations through Euphoria Films, a recently established distributor, and obviously, La Media Luna's role as main distributor of this film (Interview). Octavio Maya, head of Euphoria, orchestrated a media campaign to promote *En el Hoyo*. Maya's work also had an international dimension when he provided *En el Hoyo* promotional kits to Martin Scorsese, and the Mexican cinematographers who work in Hollywood, Emmanuel Lubezki, and Gabriel Beristáin<sup>19</sup>. However, La Media was the one dealing directly with *En el Hoyo* distribution in Mexico. At the scale of this enterprise, Rulfo was imitating the vertical integrated strategy deployed by the large distributors, the majors and Videocine. When compared, *En el hoyo* surpasses, but not by much, the relative success of *Del olvido*. The key difference here lies in the fact that this time La Media Luna was hoping to reap the profits, if any, through its own distribution. *En el Hoyo* also found distribution in the United States through Kino International and in Europe through Sonny Balunz, a film distributor.

*En el Hoyo* is a documentary where the filmmaker with a hand-held camera mingles and intimates in a candid and nonchalant manner with a group of construction workers as they build a second level of one of the main arteries of a freeway in Mexico City. The conversations take place at high and low levels around the construction, from here the title reference to the pit. The characters charmed audiences with their wit, humor, and laid-back

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<sup>19</sup> Lubezki worked in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También* (*And Your Mother Too*, 2003) and for his work in other films has received four Oscar nominations for Best Achievement in Cinematography. Beristáin worked in *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2007), and won the Oscar for Best Achievement in Cinematography, the first time he was a nominee.

way of dealing with life. At times, the documentary leaves the construction site to follow these characters in other aspects of their life where their personalities are revealed in multiple, more complex levels than simply being construction workers. Once again, Rulfo blends stylish and artistic camerawork, using time-lapse motion control and aerial cinematography, with handheld shots with unique perspectives. Video formats and 35mm film stock are intertwined in this film.

Like *Del Olvido*, *En el Hoyo* was a production financed with public and private funds ([enelhoyo.com.mx](http://enelhoyo.com.mx)). FOPROCINE and IMCINE co-produced this film with La Media Luna. The municipal Government of Mexico City also contributed some funding. *En el Hoyo* also received two grants from American institutions. The Sundance Institute Documentary Program awarded one of this one. The other came from the John Simon Guggenheim Fund. La Media Luna also received support from other private corporations and postproduction houses. Again, this is a hybrid financial mode more interested in producing a film in the first place rather than concerned with its profitability. However, one does not cancel the other.

*En el Hoyo* garnered several international accolades to parallel *Del Olvido*'s collection of awards. One of them was the Coral award to Best Documentary at the 2006 Havana Film Festival. Another one was the World Cinema Jury Prize at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. *En el Hoyo* also received a Mayahuel for Best Latin American feature film documentary. This multi-awarded documentary soon took prominent on the media.

La Media Luna launched a limited release of 22 copies. They prepared a promotional campaign that mostly relied on media coverage: many interviews on different media channels. Three billboards also helped to promote the film. La Media Luna also launched a *En el Hoyo* web site and released a CD with the soundtrack, as experimental as the documentary. According to Eugenia Montiel, they knew about some problems Marcela

Arteaga had confronted in the distribution and exhibition of *Recuerdos* (Interview). Therefore, they were vigilant to the treatment given to their twenty-two prints at each multiplex. Montiel mentioned only one incident in which the exhibitor unexpectedly pulled *En el Hoyo* from the marquee. However, Eugenia Montiel said that they did not have a problem convincing the theatre management to put it back on circulation.

According to Montiel, La Media Luna did not try to cover during the promotion of *En el Hoyo*, that this was a documentary film (Interview). However, she points out that on posters or billboards, they never said *En el Hoyo* was a documentary. Often, those involved in promoting *En el Hoyo* simply refer to this documentary as a film, but not as part of a strategy. Montiel also acknowledges distributors and exhibitors still have reservations against the idea of distributing a documentary. Often – she says –, these film distributors do not know how to promote a documentary film. In fact, some distributors were asking them after screening *En el Hoyo* in film festivals and other events if the protagonists of the documentary were delivering their lines from a script. Montiel notes these distributors were confused watching how witty and relaxed *En el Hoyo*'s protagonists appeared before the camera. In the way Montiel narrates this fact it is clear that these distributors' idea of what a documentary is was shattered.

Eugenia Montiel also affirms that many viewers in Mexico still have a misconception of what a documentary is (Interview). Not all, but some audiences – she indicates – would think that all documentaries look like those made by National Geographic. Based on Montiel's comments, the need to create cultural policies to familiarize audiences with new trends in documentary filmmaking becomes more relevant.

*En el Hoyo*'s distribution serves as evidence that it is possible for independent documentary filmmakers to enter commercial distribution and find a relative box office



success as long as they deploy adequate strategies. From the information presented above, several factors need to be taken into consideration. First, at least in Mexico, filmmakers need to take distribution in their own hands or participate as much as possible in the process. If they are able to manage their own distribution, they are expanding their chances to develop a second project in the future. Second, one crucial element is a documentary able to straddle the cultural venues as well as the commercial ones. As filmmakers are taking advantage of the latitude offered by the documentary form, there are more chances to explore innovative approaches without compromising their work. That is, they do not need to attempt pandering the audiences. The failure of *Alex Lora* is an example of this.

Third, since filmmakers in Mexico usually confront limited production and distribution resources, they need to convince audiences that their documentaries are worthy of seeing at a movie theatre. Then, film festivals and media coverage become two factors working in tandem. Documentary filmmakers should use film festivals and other circuits as test labs where to assess the chances of a documentary into commercial distribution. If their documentaries are garnering awards and a positive response from different audiences, then they should take advantage of those moments through media coverage. Film critics and media personalities could harm or help provide a documentary through their comments.

Another key aspect is public relations. Counting with personalities advocating for the distribution and exhibition of these works could work at different levels. They are acting as cultural intermediaries convincing audiences about the qualities of these films. Proper consideration of the release size is also important. Even though platforming sounds like the best way to go, a filmmaker should wonder why *Fahrenheit 9/11* with 161 prints only attracted about 4,000 viewers per print or the reasons why *Super Size Me* with 25 prints only

averaged over 1,500 per film copy. However, *Bowling for Columbine*, with only 12 prints, drew 15,000 viewers per print. Film is always a risky business.

In the end, *En el Hoyo*, with a limited 22-print release, became the second most successful documentary film, in both box office and awards terms, in the history of Mexican cinema. It surpassed *Del Olvido*'s records, reaching almost 50,000 viewers and making almost \$200,000 at the box office<sup>20</sup>. While Videocine received a fee for distributing *Del Olvido*, this time most of the benefit would go to La Media Luna Producciones, that is Rulfo and his colleagues. It was an improvement to their previous distribution experience. Yet, *Del Olvido* was an important step to learn the ropes of the film distribution business in Mexico and for calculating the risks. By controlling their own distribution, Rulfo and his partners at La Media Luna would have better chances to have a sustainable production capacity. Of course, they will always be confronting tensions in the exploitation of culture and barriers imposed by industrial and commercial practices. With the control of distribution in their hands, Rulfo and La Media Luna would be able to continue circulating this documentary through other media windows, such as video distribution, a second territory to explore in terms of distribution in the Mexican audiovisual field.

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<sup>20</sup> IMCINE reports *En el Hoyo* made \$188,644 at the box office with 49,153 viewers.

### Chapter 3

#### ***Canal 6 de Julio*<sup>21</sup>: distribution of social documentaries in an era of neoliberalism**

Canal 6 de Julio (Channel 6 of July) is a Mexican video collective, a non-profit producer of social and political documentaries, whose distribution strategies have evolved from hand-to-hand videocassette circulation in 1989 to Internet distribution by 2006. During these years, Canal 6's social documentaries have denounced political, economic and social inequalities, criticizing hegemonic powers such as governments, and mainstream television. This genre, dubbed "social documentaries," described as "with a human subject and a descriptive or transformative concern," are instruments to promote social and political change, counter information against hegemonic media content, and a mode to propagate testimonies of the disfranchised (Burton 3,6-7). The topics covered in these documentaries range from denouncing electoral fraud and the manipulation of news on television to documenting social movements and the efforts of human rights advocates. Not surprisingly, this video collective has confronted governmental censorship, and the politics involved in documentary distribution within the audiovisual field. To overcome these barriers, Canal 6 has resorted to a hybrid form of distribution. That is, both grassroots and commercial distribution strategies to disseminate its documentaries.

By employing this hybrid distribution, Canal 6 de Julio has been able to enter a shrinking Mexican public space from the 1990s to the present to contest hegemonic discourses mobilized by mainstream television. Around the world, government policies and neoliberal trends have reduced the public arenas in which diverse and alternative views can enter the debate of ideas and the meaning-making processes to counter dominant discourses

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<sup>21</sup> As shown in its website, the video collective has changed the presentation of its name from Canal 6 de Julio to *canalseisdejulio*. Here, for purposes of clarity, I use the original form.

(Raboy 160; Louw 18; Waltz 131). In Mexico, Canal 6 has taken advantage of cracks and interstices in an unstable Mexican political economic context. Those spaces and moments opened up in the interplay of forces between a slow democratic transition, neoliberal policies, and social resistance. In addition, I analyze Canal 6 de Julio's hybrid distribution strategies to identify opportunities and barriers as well as tensions and contradictions these video makers face in an intricate political economic environment.

Through this examination I discuss the potential of Canal 6 de Julio's documentary distribution as a viable model for radical alternative media projects, originated and developed in Mexico. Radical alternative media are "generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives" (Downing v). The term radical implies "radical egalitarianism as defined by inclusivity, plurality, diversity, openness, transparency and accountability" (Pickard 16). Those ideals permeate Canal 6's production and distribution practices.

As part of alternative media, this collective has contributed to the production of more complex narrative of current events by diversifying points of view and democratizing media. The collective's documentaries work as a counterbalance to mainstream television and as a platform for disenfranchised groups to voice their demands. This does not mean as Chris Atton suggests that oppositional media seek to replace commercial television (19). Canal 6 video makers not only criticize television's influence on political powers, but they also avoid its production constraints. However, they do recognize oppositional moments in Canal 11, a public TV station, and flashes of critical news reporting on commercial television (Fernández 69; Interview). At certain moments, fragments of Canal 6 de Julio's video documentaries have even appeared on Mexican television. These instances confirm the possibility of oppositional movements and groups using mainstream media (Downing xi). Those are the

moments I am particularly interested in, when an alternative and progressive content crosses from an alternative public sphere over a wider space.

Within tensions and contradictions created by uncertain political economic context, Canal 6 de Julio video makers have employed rudimentary but also corporate-like distribution practices to cross over a space that is wider than the one of an alternative public sphere, remaining an autonomous and independent producer with editorial control, and without national or transnational funding. This distribution does not restrict itself to festivals, and public screenings at universities and unions, but it reaches a cultural commercial circuit. This distribution has not been set up to cater to international audiences, but to reach a national public, despite the transnational appeal of these documentaries and its unexpected distribution outside of Mexico. However, these video makers have to struggle against official policies and industrial practices that curtail their distribution. At the same time, they have to avoid the risks involved in co-optation and assimilation by the market. They have reached their goals and overcome these threats through a process in which industrial practices have been altered to accommodate the goals of an alternative media project.

Three sections compose this analysis. The first part contextualizes Canal 6 de Julio's case study by discussing alternative media, the collective's background, Mexico's video sector, and the political economic context. The second part focuses on how Canal 6 de Julio has faced and responded to official censorship through hybrid distribution practices and its use of video and Internet technologies. The last part analyzes conflicts in the commodification of social documentaries in connection to cultural intermediaries, discourses, sustainability, and autonomy. In one sense, this study is a dialogue between alternative media studies, cultural field theory, and political economy. However, this analysis is not a thorough

account of all the issues involved around this collective, but one that focuses on its hybrid distribution and its implications.

### **Hybridity and alternative media**

Alternative media are numerous variegated projects, which elude the constraints of one single category. Avoid “tidy definitions,” recommends Downing echoing Clemencia Rodríguez’s plea (ix; 164). Thus, this study does not pretend to delimit Canal 6 de Julio’s project to a definition. The objective is to analyze and problematize its hybrid distribution.

Even though there are no definitions, scholars do suggest frameworks whereby one can problematize issues, and discuss levels of alternativity. For instance, Clemencia Rodríguez calls alternative media projects, citizens’ media, putting emphasis on the participatory role of a collectivity. Citizenship is not given, says Rodríguez, but enacted “by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape ... constesting social codes, legitimized identities ... empowering the community involved” (20). Chris Atton favors grassroots media, producers voicing their concerns, over advocacy media, producers speaking for the concerns of others. In regards to distribution, Atton uses the term “distributive use,” which implies the deliberate decentralization and relinquishment of control of reproduction and distribution processes (24-29).

Downing, Atton, and Rodríguez concur that radical alternative media do not need to meet all the requirements in any given framework. Downing says that “they break somebody’s rules, although rarely all of them in every respect” (xi). Thus, alternative media tend to blend practices. Therefore, Atton suggests to “approach these media ... paying attention to hybridity rather than expecting consistent adherence to a ‘pure’, fixed set of criteria” (29). Rodríguez proposes terms such as Jesús Martín-Barbero’s *mestizaje* and Néstor

García Canclini's hybridity as productive concepts when discussing and analyzing the heterogeneous practices found in alternative media (15). In this sense, it is crucial to understand Canal 6 de Julio's hybrid distribution not as "pure" and perfect model of alternative media, but as living process, adapting and adopting practices for its own survival.

Because alternative media are processes, and not monolithic entities, these projects can change for better or worse. In fact, they are often threatened by their implementation of "programming, funding, and technology ... at risk of losing their unique idiosyncrasy," or by "economic integration and political cooptation," which definitely kill them (C. Rodríguez 50,161). When Canal 6 de Julio appropriates industrial and commercial practices, the collective experiences these tensions and contradictions. In Mexico, neoliberalism and ambiguous government policies exacerbate those threats as this nation transits, through the inertia of an old and ossified authoritarianism, toward a democratic state.

### **Neoliberalism and video collectives**

In her study of Latin American grassroots video, Patricia Aufderheide analyzes how economic privatization, free markets, new communication technologies, and a transition toward arguably more democratic governments, have made an impact on video activist organizations since the 1990s. Focusing on Brazilian movements, Aufderheide explains that when these video organizations lost international funding and a political stance as oppositional groups, they transformed "their survival strategies" to include "competitive business plans" such as "video rental business and production workshops," which eventually failed (Aufderheide 230). Later, other video projects resisted the hostile neoliberal context.

Aufderheide's analysis reveals how fragile alternative media are when they depend

on external funding. It also shows tensions between survival and market assimilation when these media adopt hybrid practices. However, in hybridization, there are always risks and opportunities (García Canclini La Globalización 198-9). These are part of the negotiations Canal 6 de Julio video makers have to confront.

In Mexico, video collectives have also suffered the consequences of neoliberal trends that exacerbate their funding needs, and the risks in commercializing their media practices as services. One example is the all-female collective Cine Mujer-Mexico (Cine Woman), which was absorbed in the 1980s by the distribution company Zafra, once a non-profit distributor. The collective ran into distribution problems within a context that involved “shifting government policies on film and video production, national economic and political changes, and internal problems” (Ranucci and Burton 196; 240). The risks of co-optation are also prevalent when dealing with official institutions.

In the State of Oaxaca, the video collective Ojo de Agua<sup>22</sup> saw the distribution of its video programs on indigenous communities curtailed when its client, SEP, the Department of Education, realized that one of them showed an indigenous demonstration against local authorities (Smith 115-7). SEP officials decided not to broadcast this video through their satellite education system and asked Ojo de Agua not to distribute it through film festivals. Erica Wortham has noted that state-funded video projects represent an unthreatening construction of an indigenous visual memory, attuned with an official policy on diversity (367). The conflict of interest is obvious. This commercial deal allowed the collective to acquire new equipment, but these video makers, some from indigenous communities, missed the opportunity to alter the official narrative of ethnic groups.

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<sup>22</sup> Also known as Comunicación Indígena (Indigenous Communication). *Ojo de agua* refers to a spring water location, often sacred, where members of an indigenous community would collect the vital liquid. See Smith, Laurel C. “Mobilizing Indigenous Video: The Mexican Case.” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 5.1 (2006): 113-28. Also, <http://www.laneta.apc.org/ojodeagua/>.



Video Servicios is another example of the tensions derived from a transformative project and the collaboration with state institutions through the commodification of documentaries. In the 1980s, Video Servicios found a source of funding in the production of educational video for state television. With these profits, the collective produced *El Triunfo* (*The Triumph*, 1985), a thirty-minute documentary which criticized the government's environmental policies on Chiapas' tropical jungle (Ranucci and Burton 200). Through the years the collective turned into a video company that would produce the documentary series *Ventana a mi Comunidad* (*A Window to my Community*) for government entity SEP (Video Servicios Profesionales). Thus, Video Servicios lessened its political angle in favor of a lofty but less controversial approach. All these video collectives have faced conflicts between sustaining their projects through the production and distribution of their documentaries and avoiding jeopardizing their transformative goals. Therefore, when external funding sources come into play, the risks of compromising documentary content are latent.

### **Canal 6 de Julio: guiding principles**

Canal 6 de Julio video makers have informally stressed three tenets underpinning their work: independence, counter-information, and giving voice to the disfranchised. Independence means having exclusive editorial control on their works with no ties or influences from political or economic entities (Sturken). No State, clients, advertisers, political parties, or NGO organizations shape Canal 6's documentary content. This independence has enabled Canal 6 de Julio to benefit from three kinds of freedom: on content, on format, and on working schedule. Yet, their distribution is constrained by a political economic context.

Second, Canal 6 de Julio is a counter-informative media that contests the often one-sided representation of current events broadcast by mainstream television. Carlos Mendoza, Canal 6 de Julio's unofficial leader, has referred to Mexican television as the *raison d' être* behind the collective's project ("Canal 6" 57). Mainstream newscasts would tend to construct current affairs through the optics of the State and economic interests, ignoring or delegitimizing social movements, and any dissenting voice. Third, Canal 6 de Julio has served as an alternative media outlet for social movements that lack access to mass media. Through Canal 6's documentaries, these groups have voiced their demands and narrated their own versions of their struggles.

As a collective, Canal 6 de Julio leans toward models with tenets of radical democracy. A video collective should work as a collaborative effort in which a small group of individuals, with equal power and with no hierarchical chart, volunteer their work in independent, non-corporate, video production during an undetermined time period, but with certain periodicity under a set of shared goals and principles, especially a consensus decision-making process (Indymedia 34,120; Stein; Halleck 87,94,119). The collective's membership has fluctuated from 10 to 25 volunteers through the years (Ramírez 43; B. Ruíz 57; Canal 6 de Julio "Quiénes"). They are mostly film academics and students donating time and work to the group (Mendoza "Canal 6" 55). Some have left while others have joined the project. Roles tend to be fixed, but all participate in the decision-making process (Mejía Barquera 21; B. Ruíz 58).

### **Content and distribution reach**

Canal 6 de Julio's documentary production has constantly focused on issues of social injustice with local and national resonance. Therefore, those contents become suitable not

only for a localized audience, but also for a wider distribution. Rafael Rocagliolo has said that one characteristic of counter-news video collectives is that they attempt to disseminate their oppositional content to a large audience (28). For instance, during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, alternative media, either underground or on the surface, distributed counter-informative content to a large population. One Chilean video collective, Teleanálisis developed three distribution channels “above ground” to circulate oppositional videos: subscriptions, public screenings, and a mobile unit. Reaching 350 social organizations through subscriptions and 50,000 viewers, these videos represented an invisible nation neglected by official television (Gómez Mont 216). This information would be crucial during the 1989 elections (Aufderheide 221-22). An authoritarian regime, censorship, injustice, and an information vacuum elevated the need of audiences for reliable content. Canal 6 shares, up to a certain degree, similarities with Teleanálisis’ experience. In this sense, Canal 6 de Julio also intends to inform a large audience about an invisible nation ignored by Mexican TV.

### **Countering the vote count: Canal 6 de Julio’s origins**

Canal 6 de Julio was a response to the presumed rigged presidential elections that took place on July 6, 1988<sup>23</sup>. In Joy Langston’s words, “Many observers questioned the official count as the federal electoral computer ‘went down’ the day of the election and came back up days later to show Salinas the winner with just 50 percent of the votes” (78).

According to Miguel de la Madrid, president at the time, Manuel Bartlett, head of Secretaría de Gobernación<sup>24</sup>, informed him that preliminary counts did not favor the PRI (Castañeda 24). The candidate from the leftist coalition Frente Democrático Nacional (FDN)

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<sup>23</sup> The video collective’s name is a play on words that suggests an independent TV channel, *canal*, and an assigned channel frequency, which is actually a date, 6 de Julio, the 6<sup>th</sup> of July.

<sup>24</sup> Equivalent to the U.S. State Department.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was leading the votes. Final results would favor the hegemonic PRI party.

The presumed electoral fraud resulted in political turmoil and social protests, but mainstream television minimized these events. During those years in Mexico, it was the norm for mainstream television to chiefly focus on the official party during the campaign, and this PRI dominated focus continued (McDonald 97-98). Mexican television played down or ignored these popular demonstrations spurred by the controversial elections (Magallanes Blanco 68). As a reaction to this information void, the filmmakers of the independent production house Redes Cinevideo documented this nascent social movement using their video cameras. Almost two months later, the final result, the documentary *Crónica de un Fraude* (*Chronicle of a Fraud*, 1988), would work as oppositional information against mainstream television news content, which was silencing political dissent. Slowly, this documentary would circulate through alternative channels as government officials denied approval for its release through commercial venues. On February 1989, several of Redes Cinevideo's members would formally launch the non-profit collective Canal 6 de Julio with the public screening of their first video.

### **Antecedents: Camera Movements**

Canal 6 de Julio follows documentary traditions from the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) and Mexican militant documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s. It is also part of a Latin American video movement in the 1980s. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *La Hora de los Hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) and Patricio Guzmán's *La Batalla*

*de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*, 1973-6) exemplifies the NLAC documentary tradition<sup>25</sup>. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam describe *La Hora* as “political radicalism with artistic innovation,” while *La Batalla* is “lucid in its politics,” a documentary that “eschews rhetoric in favor of recording history in the making” (260,70). Solanas and Getino affirm that “Guerrilla filmmaking ... democratizes”<sup>26</sup> (50). These documentaries are about social change and denouncing social injustice, from a perspective often critical of capitalism.

Jaime Tello and Pedro Reygadas have also outlined how documentaries, NLAC films, and filmmakers influenced a wave of social and progressive documentaries in Mexico from the 1960 through the 1980s, including films by Canal 6 de Julio founder, Carlos Mendoza (162-4). Carlos Mendoza co-directed with Carlos Cruz *Chapopote* (1979), *Chahuistle* (1980), and *Charrotitlán*<sup>27</sup> (1982). These documentaries criticize state oil policies, agricultural programs, and state-corporate union relations, respectively. Thus, the trajectory of Carlos Mendoza serves as a link between the New Latin American Cinema, Mexican documentaries, and Canal 6 de Julio.

Besides denouncing social injustice, militant Mexican documentaries were also a response to the failed official promise of democratic *openness* during the first half of the 1970s (Ayala Blanco 582). During those years, several film collectives emerged through the cracks of a cinematic field co-opted by the State. Jesse Lerner has referred to the 1970s emergence of film collectives like Taller Experimental de Cine (Experimental Film Workshop) and Cooperativa de Cine Marginal (Marginal Film Cooperative) (16-7). Other

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<sup>25</sup> See Martin, Michael T. *New Latin American Cinema*. Contemporary film and television series. 2 vols. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Their cursives.

<sup>27</sup> *Chapopote* means asphalt as in petroleum refining. *Chahuistle* refers to the fungus that causes the blight that destroys harvests. *Charrotitlán* refers to a mythical land where union leaders, called *charros*, would use workers' interests as a bargain chip for their own economic and political gain.

prominent film collectives of that era were Taller de Cine Octubre (Cine October Workshop) and Cine Testimonio (Testimony Cinema), antecedents of Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries.

Canal 6 de Julio is also contemporary of the Latin American video movement developed in the late 1980s. Video collectives such as Brazilian TV Maxambomba are part of this trend. This movement was also inspired by the NLAC, but catapulted by the affordability and reproducibility of video technology. Some authors locate the convergence of video makers' interests and concerns at the 1987 Havana Festival (Festa and Santoro 85). Those concerns centered on lack of distribution and "the practically nonexistent level of commercialization" that could not "guarantee financing for new productions, let alone the financial independence of video groups themselves" (Festa and Santoro 87). Since then, sustainability and distribution have been recurrent problems for video collectives.

All these independent film and video making practices have decentralized media control and democratized the audiovisual field. Some have temporarily found ways to enter a compacted audiovisual space through the fractures of political and economic systems. Yet, video makers struggled against precarious conditions to sustain and distribute their production. Solanas and Getino have said that *La Hora* shows that "a film can be made in hostile circumstances when it has the support and collaboration of militants and cadres from the people" (50). Thus, supporters could sustain a video collective, but the challenge is how to make a video available for distribution in a hostile video space.

### **The Mexican videosphere**

During 1988-2006, the Mexican video space reflected the ambivalent circumstances between Mexico's political economic context and neoliberal times. Historically, video player penetration in Mexican households has hardly surpassed a 50 percent level. VCR penetration

went from 8 percent in 1985 to 43 percent in 1997 (Holtz 196; Celis 41). Even though DVD players arrived in Mexico in 1998, expensive units kept consumers at bay. DVD penetration would gradually increase from 15 percent in 2003 to 47.9 percent in 2006 with around 22 million Mexican households (German Film Service 12).

Slow adoption of new technology makes sense in a country with a high level of poverty. Poverty levels in Mexico have remained above 60 percent since the mid 1980s, and have declined around 50 percent after 2005 (Gallagher and Zarsky 47; World Bank Poverty xxi-xxii; Gasparini, Gutiérrez and Tornarolli 209-45). As a contradiction, between 1991 and 2005, the Mexican video market has remained around eleventh place worldwide (Holtz 204; Scott). According to AC Nielsen, Mexico reached fourth place in video rentals in 2005 (Navarro 11). Only an unequal distribution of wealth can explain those numbers.

### **Facing reality: video distribution circuits in Mexico**

Within the Mexican audiovisual field, video circulates and is distributed through three different types of venues: alternative, festival and commercial circuits. Often, these sectors overlap making blurred boundaries. Not without problems, Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries have circulated in all three venues. The alternative circuit is obviously the space *par excellence* for the distribution of social documentaries such as those produced by Canal 6. Public squares, unions' facilities, and community centers are distinctive scenarios for the distribution of independent videos. In addition, festivals offer an overlapping exhibition space for films and video coming from different genres and different producers. In some festivals, commercial television producers compete against independent filmmakers such as video activists or non-profit organizations.

Since the 1990s, film and video festivals have flourished nationwide creating another outlet for social documentaries. Mexican festivals are often independent initiatives, but always funded through private corporations and public institutions. Some of these festivals have become international events such as the Guadalajara International Film Festival and the Morelia Film Festival, with an emphasis on documentaries. Other ones like Videoarte, and Pantalla de Cristal (Crystal Screen) are dedicated to video works. *Contra el Silencio Todas las Voces* (Against Silence, All Voices), has become an international festival fully devoted to social and independent documentaries. In this biannual festival, Mexican entries reach an average of 137 Mexican documentaries per year since 2000<sup>28</sup>. Created in 2006, DOCSDF is Mexico City's International Documentary Film Festival. In 2006, 71 documentaries were submitted for DOCSDF's Premio José Rovirosa<sup>29</sup>. The numbers of entries for each of these two festivals reveal a significant documentary production. However, many of these documentaries do not conform to the demands of commercial distribution.

### **The state of the video rental industry in Mexico**

The video industry in Mexico has developed as an oligopoly of national and transnational corporations. This video space works as a second distribution window for American theatrical releases. Videovisa, Blockbuster, the Hollywood majors, and a few other middle-size to large companies have dominated video distribution, sales, and rentals since 1984. In 1997, Videovisa, Televisa's video branch from 1984-1989, controlled 60 percent of rentals with only 20 percent of all video stores nationwide, and 65 percent of the distribution market ("Entretenimiento" 1; Picazo Sánchez 66,80). Videovisa also operated as Hollywood's video distributor arm. However, Videovisa's business started to decline by the

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<sup>28</sup> Source: *Voces Contra el Silencio Video Independiente*, A.C., 2000-2006.

<sup>29</sup> Source: DOCSDF.



end of 1997 due to NAFTA, the 1994 Mexican economic crisis, the entrance of Blockbuster into the market, and Hollywood majors initiating video operations in Mexico. These circumstances were part of neoliberal and transnational tendencies.

Blockbuster arrived in Mexico in 1991. Its ascension started in 1994 once it became part of the media empire led by VIACOM. By 2001, Videovisa was gone. Blockbuster with only 250 stores had 50 percent of the market, leaving the rest to 4,000 independent video shops (Ramírez and Vargas 8). Later, the MPA would only negotiate exclusive distribution rights with two video distributors, Videomax and Quality Films, both Mexican companies. Thus, the situation in Mexico's theatrical distribution and exhibition is replicated in the video industry.

Historically, Mexican films and videos, including documentaries, have been below 15 percent of video catalogs. In 1988, Mexican titles only reached 13.6 percent in a 6,300 title universe handled by all 43 distributors (Picazo Sánchez 67). In 1991, American films represented 76 and 70 percent of Videovisa's and Videomax's catalogs (García Canclini "Del Cine" 35). In 2002, Blockbuster executive Diego Cosío conceded that out of their 4,000 video titles, only 350 corresponded to Mexican films ("Inaugura" 1). This means less than 9 percent. The situation gets worse for Mexican documentaries.

The preeminent documentaries in Blockbuster catalogs are Discovery Channel's and National Geographic's productions. Mexican Editorial Clío, associated with Televisa, finds a space on these shelves with its historical documentaries that are broadcast on Sunday nights. Not all documentaries produced in Mexico secure a video distribution. By the end of 2006, the on-line catalog of Blockbuster in Mexico included Rulfo's *Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo*, but there was no trace of theatrical releases such as Marcela Arteaga's *Recuerdos*, Sandro Halphen's *Ocho Candelas* or Alejandra Islas's *Muxes*. In Blockbuster, there is no space for

video documentaries about the Zapatistas, and other social movements. As John Downing has noted, “The vast majority of video stores neither know nor wish to know such titles (Downing 196). This is how media companies privatize a large sector of cultural development in Mexico.

A few distributors control the Mexican commercial video circuit. Néstor García Canclini has criticized how “homogenous programming designed by monopolies” has created a common repertoire nationwide on the false premise that “everybody in the country resembles one another” (Consumers 113). It is difficult to assess diversity in media content. However, the limited representation of Mexican documentaries in video catalogs is indicative of a lack of it. García Canclini observes how global processes end up co-producing national identities, but he also argues for spaces of cultural difference, dissidence, innovation and creative risk (“Políticas” 58). Canal 6 de Julio has mobilized documentaries with those characteristics through other kind of commercial channel. Bookstores, art centers, small and independent video shops compose a sort of “alternative commercial space” or cultural circuit for social video documentaries. This is a fragment of the commercial market, but Canal 6 de Julio has found in that fragment a way to expand its reach outside an alternative public sphere.

### **Canal 6 de Julio and the conditions for an alternative video distribution**

To contextualize the conditions in which Canal 6 de Julio develops its hybrid distribution, here I analyze five salient factors: censorship; videotape technology; political context including social movements; an information void; and critical documentaries. At first, political censorship, and economic factors (i.e. distributors not wanting to risk sales) barred Canal 6 de Julio from entering massive commercial distribution through video rental stores,

supermarkets, and department stores. However, by the time government officials denied approval for *Crónica de un Fraude*'s commercial distribution, this documentary had already circulated through alternative venues.

Videotape technology, with its portability, video and audio integration, and affordability offered, first to Redes Cinevideo, and later to Canal 6 de Julio, a viable communication medium. Carlos Mendoza has mentioned that Redes Cinevideo and *Crónica*'s experience was indicative that video production was a feasible project for disseminating critical content to contest the official discourse (Flores Vega 93). Mendoza has described the VCR base in Mexico as the largest distribution network (Patiño 45). However, the technology by itself had only latent potential for an alternative video distribution.

The historical moment in which Canal 6 de Julio claims an alternative position in the audiovisual field is the beginning of a series of social movements during 1988-1997 against anti-democratic practices and unfavorable social conditions that a stagnated regime had developed through many years. Julio Labastida and Miguel López describe this period as a protracted democratic transition, an extended one, from an authoritarian regime to one based on democratic electoral elections (750). That moment expands until 2006. Through those years, the Mexican State appears to suspend its repressive politics, but it works as a simulation. Thus, the so-called *Cardenismo*<sup>30</sup> would be the first of many social movements. Canal 6 de Julio video activists followed *Cardenismo* in documentaries like *Crónica* and *¡Qué Renuncie!* (*He Should Resign!*, 1989)<sup>31</sup>. These videos became extremely popular, especially, but not exclusively, among the constituency of the movement.

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<sup>30</sup> *Cardenismo* is neologism inspired by Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas who led this movement after losing the presidency due to an alleged fraudulent presidential election.

<sup>31</sup> This video builds an argument to demand Salinas to step down as president.

The *Cardenismo* waned by mid 1989, becoming institutionalized through a political party, Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD. After 1990, Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries did not reach the high distribution of *Crónica* or *¡Qué Renuncie!* (Mendoza "Canal 6" 56). Canal 6 could have ended along with the democratic movement that fueled the distribution of a couple of documentaries. After all, some scholars have noticed that alternative media are often tied to social movements, movements that demand social justice (Downing 23; Dagron 44). These social movements "advocate for people who are economically, socially, or politically marginalized in local communities and global society" (Atkinson and Dougherty 65). Once, the movement ends, scholars suggest, its alternative media projects would eventually fade away too (Downing 23; Dagron 44). This occurs due to the fact that sources of funding and voluntary work become scarce. Therefore, alternative media tend to be short-lived. However, Canal 6 has surpassed the original social movement that catalyzed its foundation.

Canal 6 de Julio has documented many electoral conflicts, social problems, and popular movements for many years. The documentary *San Luis: Lección de Dignidad* (*San Luis: A Lesson of Dignity*, 1991), which covers the *Navismo*<sup>32</sup> movement, is one example. Canal 6 would continue witnessing popular demonstrations against social injustice, becoming a long-term project.

The fourth factor to take into account is the information void left by television. This is explained in the vested interests that the PRI regime developed with commercial television through many decades. John Sinclair has referred to these ties as "Televisa's loyalty to the ruling party" (*Latin American* 39-40). Edward Herrman and Robert McChesney have said that Televisa is "part of an elite establishment and has a symbiotic and mutually supportive

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<sup>32</sup> Akin to Cárdenas, Salvador Nava led a democratic movement to resist another presumed electoral fraud in the San Luis Potosí state.

relationship with the government in power” (165). This circumstance precluded the possibility of watching *Cardenismo* demonstrations and many other popular movements depicted in a fair manner on Mexican television. However, the public was looking for information to make sense of that political moment. Here the last factor, Canal 6 de Julio’s documentaries, come into place.

The popularity that Canal 6 de Julio’s documentaries found within *Cardenismo* would expand beyond the viewers who were part of this movement. Carlos Mendoza has observed that “when civil society gets mobilized, they seek our videotapes to gather more information” (Patiño 45). Canal 6 de Julio has produced their documentaries based on a style that combines a poignant and emphatic critical commentary with images and sounds hard to dispute. These video activists have constructed visual arguments that have appealed to those involved with many social movements, but also academics, students, and others interested in sociopolitical issues discussed from a popular perspective.

### **Three eras of a hybrid video documentary distribution**

Canal 6 de Julio has endured dynamic and complex political, economic, and technological transformations through three different eras. The first one begins from July 1988, after the presumed presidential electoral fraud, to the end of January 1994, before the release of *La Guerra de Chiapas* (*The War of Chiapas*, 1994), a video about the Zapatista uprising. Carlos Mendoza has characterized that period as a “state of emergency” (Vega 30). The beginning of this era predates Canal 6 de Julio and starts with *Crónica de un Fraude* and the production house Redes Cinevideo since some of these video makers carried with them and into Canal 6 de Julio’s foundation, the same social and political concerns. Also, Redes Cinevideo would eventually transfer *Crónica de un Fraude*’s copyrights and royalties to

Canal 6 de Julio (Martínez 1). This first period of emergence and emergency is mostly characterized by direct sales and hand-to-hand distribution, and public screenings at bookstores and squares. Censorship, and political harassment are prevalent during this era.

The second moment, 1994-1998, is a period of growth. Thanks to the success of the documentary *La Guerra de Chiapas*, the collective expands its distribution through some bookstores. In regard to those days, Mendoza has said, “That was an important moment in Canal 6 de Julio’s history. Many possibilities that were closed suddenly open” (Herrera Tello n. p.). Thus, Canal 6 de Julio established a more formal, but still limited distribution network.

The last period, 1998-2006, attests the transit from a stagnated PRI regime to a PAN presidency. According to Nancy Ventura, Canal 6 de Julio’s producer, 1998 signifies the institutionalization of Canal 6 de Julio’s distribution thanks to new independent bookstore franchises such as Gandhi Librerías, and El Sótano (Interview). Two prominent documentaries are key in this period: *Tlatelolco: las Claves de la Masacre* (*Tlatelolco: Clues to the Massacre*, 2003), and *Atenco, Romper el Cerco* (*Atenco: Breaking the Siege*, 2005). The former is a Canal 6 de Julio’s co-production with progressive newspaper *La Jornada*. Newsstands became one of its main distribution channels. The latter is a co-production with Chiapas Media Project/Promedios and Chiapas Indymedia. Streaming video technologies made this documentary available through Internet free of charge. Through Canal 6 de Julio’s website, this video became widely available. Networking with allies, and adapting new technologies are two main features of this period.

### **Censorship: tensions and fractures**

Censorship in its variegated disguises has constantly hindered Canal 6 de Julio’s documentary distribution. Therefore, it becomes vital to understand how censorship has

functioned in attempting to limit the reach of Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries. Censorship has appeared in the form of official marginalization from commercial distribution; public screening shutdowns; denial of press accreditation; office raids; surveillance; and physical aggressions. Censorship has been diffused through the many bureaucratic ranks, but simultaneously very tangible, sometimes absent, but always latent. Alfonso Gumucio Dagron suggests that the importance of alternative media projects "could be measured by the attempts to silence them" as they confront "power structures and "hegemonic cultures" (48). Then, Canal 6 de Julio can rightly claim a place among alternative media when government officials perceiving Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries as a threat to political powers have exerted censorship to thwart their distribution. Conversely, political powers have also run into contradictions as they face tensions between leaving behind an authoritarian regime and entering into a democratic state. Through those cracks in the political system, Canal 6 de Julio has found either moments to temporally seize a public venue or channels to institutionalized its distribution.

The first censorship act against Canal 6 was when in October 1988, the official agency RTC<sup>33</sup> began to indefinitely postpone and implicitly deny the registration of *Crónica de un Fraude* into the public film register, barring this documentary from commercial distribution. However, Canal 6 de Julio video makers challenged authorities by claiming their constitutional right of freedom of speech. Labels on videotape cases indicated that the State could not interfere with Canal 6 de Julio's video signal (Toussaint "El Canal 6" 58). As an introduction to their documentaries, the collective include as an insert a video statement:

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<sup>33</sup> RTC is the acronym of Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía, part of Secretaría de Gobernación, created by the government in 1977 with the pretense to coordinate media efforts, such as the national film archive Cineteca Nacional, and keep records of media productions. In reality, this agency acts as a censoring entity.

“with the license that only the Mexican Constitution can grant, Canal 6 de Julio broadcasts ...”. Through those statements, Canal 6 de Julio video makers defended their right to an untethered distribution.

Screening shutdowns and boycotts followed. At the 1990 Biennial Video festival in Mexico City, officials cancelled all screenings taking place at the Cineteca Nacional<sup>34</sup>, back then part of RTC, when they learned that Canal 6 de Julio’s documentaries *Crónica* and *Modernidad Bárbara* (*Barbarian Modernity*, 1990) were in competition (Dada 48). Also during this first era, due to legal barriers and RTC admonitions, some VHS duplication companies would not accept a work order from Canal 6 (Mejía Barquera 21). Then, tension heightened during the Zapatista uprising, ignited on January 1, 1994 when NAFTA came into effect.

Canal 6 de Julio’s offices were raided four times between January 9 and January 18 (Vicenteño 3A; Granados Chapa "Freno" n. p.; Alvarez Icaza 20). During those days, the collective had been working on *La Guerra de Chiapas*, a documentary debunking the official account of the rebellion presented by Mexican television portraying the Zapatista insurgency as a foreign force, and a group of criminals. In the first raid, video equipment, audiocassettes, and documents were stolen and the perpetrators left graffiti on the wall that read, “Grupo PRI” (PRI Group) (“Roban equipo” 23). Later, the release of *La Guerra de Chiapas* would signify a decisive moment for Canal 6 de Julio’s distribution.

During the following eras in Canal 6 de Julio’s trajectory, censorship decreased but was still present through the usual repressive practices. Censorship would appear mostly, but not exclusively, around public screenings of documentaries on the Zapatistas and Chiapas.

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<sup>34</sup> The National Cinematheque is the most important film archive in Mexico and its facilities host a theatre complex with eight theatres. *La Cineteca* is part of SEP since 1996. Source: <http://www.cinetecanacional.net>.



Several boycotts prevented Canal 6 de Julio's documentary screenings from occurring in Mexico City between 1994 and 1996 (Salinas 15D; Villalobos 14). Most of them were devised by local and middle-rank officials, an indication that censorship spreads through different government levels.

During the slow Mexican democratic transition around the mid 1990s, the Mexican State showed an ambiguous stance in relation to tolerance to critical content. This situation allowed Canal 6 de Julio to distribute documentaries through bookstores without official approval for commercial distribution. This "grey area" also provided opportunities within Televisa to denounce repression against rural and indigenous communities. Televisa's news analysis program *Detrás de la Noticia* (*Behind the News*) or DDN, led by critical journalist Ricardo Rocha, covered both incidents. In the first one, a video revealed how police forces in the State of Guerrero opened fire against farmers killing 17 and injuring 21 nearby the Aguas Blancas community in June 1995. The video contradicted the official version presented by the State of Guerrero authorities. The farmers belonged to a popular organization that had been demanding a stop to indiscriminate deforestation. As she narrates this episode, DeeDee Halleck notes, "the story was quickly censored off the airwaves, but Canal 6 reproduced it and amplified it for cassette distribution ... with a larger discussion of the situation in Guerrero and interviews with peasants who survived" (388). Canal 6 de Julio's *La Matanza de Aguas Blancas* (*Aguas Blancas Massacre*, 1995) repositioned this issue in the public agenda.

Canal 6 de Julio also investigated the massacre of Acteal, in Chiapas. Two weeks before the massacre, DDN broadcasted a reportage that paid attention to displaced indigenous communities in Chiapas who were fleeing the threats of paramilitary groups, that these communities referred as "los Priístas," PRI militants. On December 22, 1997, local

paramilitary groups killed 42 members of the ethnic community Las Abejas in Chiapas. The following day, commercial television's coverage on this mass murder relied mostly on official statements (Albarrán and Ambriz 18). Through his weekend news program DDN Ricardo Rocha was one of the few questioning the presence of paramilitary groups in the region ("Investigan"). Taking an even further step, Canal 6 de Julio would produce a detailed investigative report in the documentary *Acteal: Estrategia de Muerte (Acteal: Deadly Strategy, 1998)* despite political harassment and surveillance (N. Fuentes). This documentary links the government and military forces to the creation and training of these paramilitary groups. Thus, the Mexican government had articulated two contradictory discourses, one of a democratic state with freedom of speech, and another one of repression. Within those tensions, Canal 6 managed to distribute its documentaries.

The third era 1998-2006 combines lessening censorship measures with political contradictions. An ambiguous indication of the so-called democratic transition occurred when Televisa broadcast a special program around the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre (Aranda 3). This was a confirmation that these tragic events were no longer taboo on Mexican television. Previously, the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX* had broadcast an episode which included a segment on the Tlatelolco massacre. In any case, Televisa's program was still superficial and original film material was manipulated. As a counterpoint to this, Canal 6 de Julio produced a series of documentaries on this historical event based on exhaustive research. The final version, *Tlatelolco: las Claves de la Massacre*, would suggest an orchestrated plan between the executive branch and the military to crush the 1968 student movement using snipers and paramilitary groups dressed as civilians. Co-produced by newspaper *La Jornada*, *Tlatelolco* was widely distributed through newsstands.

According to Mendoza, almost 30,000 DVD units of this documentary were sold (Mendoza Interview). The documentary took the Second Coral award at the 2003 Havana Film Festival.

Tensions around 2005 and 2006 would reveal the fragile Mexican democratic transition. In 2005, the President's office declined to Canal 6 de Julio's request for footage in which President Fox made statements in relation to the legal case led by his government against the popular PRD presidential hopeful and then Mexico City's mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Pérez Silva). Social movements would break out as local governments in the State of Mexico and the State of Oaxaca employed repressive measures to suffocate popular demands. In May 4, 2006, Canal 6 produced the documentary *Romper el Cerco* on the assault by police forces against the townspeople of Atenco. Later, "threatened" by the video camera, Mexico City police would assault three of Canal 6 de Julio video activists as they were recording a juvenile arrest on September 15, 2006. The police would destroy the videocamera, confiscate the videotape, and send the videographer Juan Pablo Ramos to the hospital (Reporteros Sin Fronteras).

Socially and politically charged documentaries have been censored in Mexico since the 1960s. Canal 6 de Julio is not an isolated case. Leobardo López's *El Grito* and Oscar Menéndez's *Aquí México* are two examples among many others. In the mid 1990s, Juan Francisco Urrusti rescued his documentary *El Pueblo Mexicano que Camina* from censorship as authorities at Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenous Institute, INI) the official agency producing his documentary film, wanted to cease production citing that the film revealed (albeit unintentionally) Mexico's poverty at the time when the NAFTA talks were taking place (Interview). In 2003, the public TV station Canal 22 cancelled the broadcast of Francisco Taboada's *Los Últimos Zapatista* due to quality issues identified by the station head, Enrique Strauss, despite the praise lauded on it by his staff (Vargas; Taboada

Interview). *Los Últimos Zapatistas* provided a critique of Carlos Salinas's neoliberal reforms such as the changes in land ownership that allowed communal land or *ejidos* to be sold.

Alfonso Gumucio Dagron says that alternative media are “demonized by their more hostile detractors as destabilizing ‘democratic’ society (read ‘the ordered routines of electoral politics’) and threatening the ‘free media’ (read ‘corporate media’)” (46). Government officials and media executives see social documentaries as a threat to their political power and commercial interests. Therefore, they tend to censor these contents through many different strategies often under the veil of bureaucracy and flawed arguments, throwing smoke screens as a cover up of censorship.

#### **Alternative distribution: basic practices**

At first, Canal 6 de Julio video makers employed elementary methods to disseminate their documentaries such as selling VHS tapes at political events and rallies. This early distribution was already hybrid, exposing tensions between technological attributes and sustainability objectives, between informal practices and communicative goals. Canal 6 de Julio video makers sold their documentaries to support their work while at the same time encouraged the public to reproduce the tapes to disseminate their contents. Videotapes passed from hand to hand. These rudimentary distribution practices possessed an industrialized characteristic given by video technology: an electronic reproduction capability.

David Hesmondhalgh notes that core cultural industries can mass reproduce their texts through industrialized methods while the reproduction capabilities of peripheral cultural industries are limited or nonexistent (Cultural Industries 13). However, in Canal 6 de Julio's distribution, mass reproduction turned out to be a hybrid process: one industrialized by the collective, and another one, informal, rudimentary, unorganized, individualized, and

unrestricted by supporters and others. In this sense, any resemblance to commercial distribution was starting to be subverted.

Canal 6 de Julio's video distribution has continued to alter and struggle with the tensions between a commercial and alternative distribution. These video makers have not dropped their early practices (i.e. public screenings to introduce documentaries and selling videotapes after the event), based on methods previously employed by Redes Cinevideo, even when they have adopted more industrialized strategies. Original practices, such as the mass reproduction of tapes by the constituency of a social movement, exhibit conflicts between sustainability and purpose. Canal 6 de Julio usually introduces a new documentary in a free public event. Locales range from bookstores to cultural centers, and in one case, rented movie theatres. According to alternative press from this era, video copies would be sold at these venues in support of this independent production project, but at the same time, these videos were also lent to social organizations for their own screenings at no cost ("Crónica de un Fraude" n. p.). Early documentaries' prices were equivalent to a one-month rent of cable television (Fernández 69). Even though prices have dropped, this original elevated price contributed to a high level of informal reproduction, which has continued over time.

Tape-to-tape video transfers would become an early common practice somewhat tolerated by these video makers trying to put communicative goals before sustainability. Carlos Mendoza has described Canal 6's distribution process in these terms, "People buy a video, then they watch it, they lent it, and they make copies" (Mejía Barquera 21). These video activists would also proudly point out the high level of circulation their videos enjoyed through informal reproduction. They would estimate that 30,000 copies of *Crónica* were in circulation at one point when they only sold 2,000 tapes (Mejía Barquera 21; Patiño 45). Estimating 50 plus viewers per tape, Mendoza would consider that about 2 million viewers

had seen *Crónica* and *La Guerra de Chiapas* (B. Ruíz 57; Flores Vega 94). Alfonso Dagon says that it is not productive to employ industrial parameters to measure alternative media (48). However, in this case, Canal 6 's members employ those numbers in a subversive manner by underlining how those contents reach their audiences even if only through alternative channels. After the first screening of their documentary *¡Qué Renuncie!*, Carlos Mendoza said, "It doesn't matter if they make copies and organize screenings. That would be very positive" (Castro "Que Renuncie" n. p.). Many years later, Canal 6's website ([canalseisdejulio.com.mx](http://canalseisdejulio.com.mx)) would encourage viewers to avoid piracy practices in support of this alternative media project. Thus, the multiplying effect has imposed a threat to the survival of Canal 6 as it makes an impact on funding. Therefore, by subverting commercial distribution, the collective has struggled between sustainability and communicative goals.

Hand-to-hand distribution and free public screenings provides dialogic opportunities to discuss an account of current events that differs from the one mobilized by mainstream television. After a free public screening there is often a question and answer session. John Downing considers "radical media as a dialogic, democratic public sphere within popular culture" (47,391). For instance, after watching *Zapatistas* (2003) at the Cineteca Nacional, several viewers participated in an open discussion stressing the need to distribute the video to more people who did not know what the conflict was about (Mateos and Espinosa 2a-3a). In 2006, the Chiapas Indymedia website distributed *Romper el Cerco* via Internet, free of charge. Postings show that people were immediately committed to circulate this documentary among neighbors, co-workers, and friends (Chiapas IndyMedia). Thus, Canal 6 de Julio's distribution goes beyond the goals dictated by market logics. Other video collectives operate in a similar way.

One example is the aforementioned TV Maxambomba, a video project sponsored by the Brazilian non-profit organization Popular Image Creation Center (CECIP). Working with low-income communities in Rio de Janeiro's Baixada neighborhoods, TV Maxambomba's crews first record interviews with residents about local issues just to screen them later to the community, thus, opening an opportunity for discussion (C. Rodríguez 35; Herman and McChesney 203). Instead of profit maximization, these collectives function in terms of maximizing those dialogic moments.

### **Appropriating industrial practices: bookstore distribution**

From the era of growth to the institutionalization period, Canal 6 de Julio would progressively appropriate corporate-like practices without abandoning original methods of distribution. The collective's foray into an alternative cultural commercial circuit, the so-called cultural bookstore circuit, did not occur without tensions and ambiguities. First, this collective entered this circuit without RTC approval for commercial distribution, thus, making a statement of autonomy and of unchallenged independence. These documentarians seized the opportunities opened by inconsistencies in the Mexican government policy enforcement. During the mid 1990s, this authoritarian regime was immersed in conflicts between a democratic discourse and the struggles to remain in power.

The era of growth starts with *La Guerra de Chiapas*, which premiered at the San Ángel Cultural Center in Mexico City. This moment symbolizes a watershed for Canal 6 de Julio's distribution. After this public event, the feasibility of a long-term, self-sustainable video project was evident. The information void and misinformation generated by commercial television in collusion with the government made audiences seek out reliable information. On January 28, 1994, more than two thousand viewers took turns to entering the

400-seat auditorium at San Ángel (Haw n. p.). All videocassettes were sold (Ventura Interview). Yet, the collective lacked a distribution system. The next morning, people lined up in front of Canal 6 de Julio's offices to buy this video documentary. After the popularity of *La Guerra de Chiapas*, bookstores staff began to contact Canal 6 de Julio requesting documentaries.

To enter video distribution through bookstores, one member of the collective had to act as a distributor. With legal rights to commercialize these documentaries, the distributor would interact with commercial bookstores, especially in Mexico City. Canal 6 de Julio's videos arrived first at two well-known cultural bookstores, El Sótano and Gandhi between 1994 and 1995 (Ventura Interview; Mendoza Email). During those years, other smaller bookstores would also establish operations. Nancy Ventura, who has been the acting distributor since 1995, established relations with those new smaller outlets and the growing number of El Sótanos' and Gandhi's branches.

Since the start, bookstores have taken these documentaries as consignment stock. They also reserve the right to decline a video. Around the mid 1990s, Gandhi made this informal rule effective with *Cárcel a Salinas (Jail to Salinas, 1995)*. Most bookstores retain between 30 to 40 percent of each sale. Even though these bookstores register these transactions in their accounting systems and show these documentary titles on their databases, there is not a formal contract *per se*. However, the aforementioned practices are typical in video commercialization.

Besides having a more formal distribution through bookstores, Canal 6 de Julio has continued to nurture small and independent sellers. In an interview, Ventura mentions a seller from the State of Guerrero who periodically requests roughly 300 videos (Interview). Then, the seller travels to rural communities where there is an audience for these documentaries.



Also, an informal network of street vendors is still in operation. Ventura offers wholesale prices to these vendors. Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries have also reached universities in Mexico, and at one point, this was also possible in the United States via the now defunct Latin American Video Archives (LAVA). Therefore, throughout this second period, Canal 6 incorporated more industrialized practices without eliminating original distribution strategies. This distribution was possible due to the tensions in the political context around the mid 1990s, which opened some opportunities for Canal 6 de Julio's videos. Those opportunities contrasted with the sheer repression capture by documentaries like *La Matanza de Aguas Blancas* and *Acteal*. These documentaries demonstrate that the PRI regime was still resorting to old repressive.

### **Networking and distribution**

In the institutionalization era, Canal 6 de Julio developed several alliances that functioned as collaborative networks. Many authors have been using the concept of networks to explain the new moment of interconnectivity around the world in the so-called information age and within the information society. In 1991, Delia Crovi noted in Mexico the growing presence of decentralized, horizontal and interconnected non-profit networks (universities, research centers, unions, independent organizations) producing and putting in circulation a varied repertoire of video content (92-96). In his seminal book *The Network Society*, Manuel Castells provides a comprehensive study around this concept as a tool to understand the new conditions sprawling around the world (470). Jeremy Rifkin has also noted the change in film production from the Hollywood studio model to one of networks in which large corporations spread the risks with small players who enjoy autonomy and creativity by not being part of a large corporation (361-74). Some authors have focused on networks of collaborations based

on trust, in particular applied to film industries (Kong 63-64). Here, I use the concept of networks to discuss Canal 6 de Julio's distribution in its third era.

From the outset, Canal 6 de Julio has relied on two key networks, one provided by social movements, and another one based around VCRs and their capabilities of reproduction. In 1998, a third network began its development through an array of bookstores, a series of fixed points of sales, nationwide. That same year, a series of events would propel Canal 6 de Julio into numerous production collaborations with writers, journalists and researchers. In addition, Canal 6 would make alliances with other non-profit organizations, and video collectives to produce and distribute video documentaries. Paul Hirsch notes that "in cultural industry systems, the formal and informal contracts required cross-organizational boundaries and often involve freelance professionals and their associates" (358). The sluggish democratic transition, accompanied by neoliberal and cultural policies would develop ambiguous conditions that would aid and, at the same time affect Canal 6 de Julio's distribution through networking. One of these ambiguities is Educal.

Canal 6 de Julio has taken advantage of one cultural policy the PRI regime devised in 1982, but which dramatically evolved in 1998: the state-owned bookstore franchise Educal. Even though Canal 6 de Julio has found ways to distribute their documentaries in, and outside Mexico City, those channels did not equate to a comprehensive and formal distribution network. Educal offers that kind of network. Educal has evolved from being a producer of pedagogic material for SEP in 1982 to SEP's book distributor in 1987, and finally to cultural bookstore franchise, able to commercialize and distribute cultural products from any institution (Educal). By 2006, Canal 6 de Julio had more than forty sale points through Educal (Canal 6 de Julio "Directorio"). However, Educal, as a state-owned bookstore, also presents problems.

One problem is that Educal could be more susceptible than private bookstore in declining distribution for a particular documentary. By 2006, Educal has only declined selling *Democracia para Imbéciles (Democracy for Idiots, 2005)*, and *Aventuras en Foxilandia (Adventures in Foxiland, 2006)* (Ventura Interview). Both documentaries criticize the Fox administration and many prominent politicians from all parties. The second drawback has greater repercussions. They are the risks involved in relying on a network that literally belongs to the government. It is not about co-optation or assimilation. However, at any point, Canal 6's large reach through these bookstores can evaporate. The threat of precluding this video distribution hangs over this collective as a sword of Damocles.

It is an oxymoron that, without the official RTC's approval for commercial distribution, Canal 6 de Julio has managed to enter a corner of the commercial circuit thanks to this same government. The fact that Educal Bookstores catered to already informed and educated audiences may partially explain that the government has shown no interest in interfering in Canal 6's bookstore distribution. As a paradox, Educal has enabled the institutionalization of Canal 6.

During this period, TV networks would often depict social movements as aggressors and the State repressive apparatus as the right thing to do, deflecting responsibility from authorities. Sallie Hughes and Chappel Lawson have mentioned that, even though the political transition had "diminished pressure on the main broadcasters," Mexican television news coverage was still influenced by political bias around year 2000 (87-88). In this environment, Canal 6 de Julio video makers produced several key documentaries establishing relations with a diverse group of personalities and institutions, including television networks and stations.

In 1998, during Ernesto Zedillo's government, Canal 6 de Julio would conduct an in-depth investigation on the Tlatelolco massacre through collaborations with experts and finding visual material from international film archives. The collective would suggest the possibility of an orchestrated plan to simulate a crossfire between military forces and students to justify an attack on the protesters (Gallegos "México 68" 1,6). This in-depth research would evolve from *Batallón Olimpia* (*Olimpia Battalion*, 1998) to *Operación Galeana* (Galeana Operation, 2000) to *Tlatelolco: Las Claves de la Masacre* in 2003. In this interstice of the political system, thanks to the many years that had past, Canal 6 de Julio seized the opportunity to reveal the machinery behind these events. The last of these documentaries, *Tlatelolco*, would also be the first of two co-productions with the newspaper *La Jornada*.

Co-productions with *La Jornada* would allow *Tlatelolco* and *Zapatistas* to circulate through newsstands, and other public spaces restricted before to Canal 6. The Mexico City public TV station, Canal 11 or ONCE TV would broadcast *Tlatelolco* in 2003 thanks to a negotiation through *La Jornada*, but without commercial benefits for the collective (Ventura; Güemes). *Zapatistas* was screened at Cineteca Nacional, a place forbidden for *Crónica de un Fraude* in 1990. This particular association with a larger media entity resembles certain aspects of current industrial trends in which large corporations rely on smaller production entities to share risks, but also allow creativity. However, Canal 6 de Julio and *La Jornada* association tend to subvert that practice by altering the purpose of that association. The newspaper *La Jornada* expands its prestige into a new field, an audiovisual one with a product that follows its critical editorial line. Canal 6 has welcomed the wider distribution and promotion to a documentary in which the collective has put a lot of effort, and gain access to an educated, left-leaning audience. Here, risks of losing a large investment and

creative benefits are exchanged for a symbolic gain that translates in an authoritative voice and prestige.

During these years, Canal 6 de Julio's relationship with television was confrontational, but also tinted with brief moments of cooperation. From 1998 through 2006, Canal 6 de Julio produced several documentaries instilled with an acute critique of Mexican television and its growing influence in politics. *UNAM, Memoria del Caos, Teledictadura (TV-Dictatorship, 2000), Telecomplot (TV-Complot, 2004), Teletiranía (TV-Tirany, 2005)* show how Mexican television frames media content to favor political and economic interests. *UNAM* shows a constant and deliberate mediatic portrayal of a student strike as a violent movement. This documentary also shows Televisa's news anchor Joaquín López Dóriga eagerly looking for evidence of weapons to construct a negative picture of that movement. Florence Toussaint illustrates his actions, "...he picked a drill and asked a police officer if that was weapon" ("La UNAM" 69). In 2003, *Democracia para Imbéciles* offered a critique on the democratic transition and mediated politics. Conversely, there were also brief moments of respectful collaborations between Televisa and Canal 6 de Julio, specifically through the stellar newscast led by Joaquín López Dóriga. The death of human rights activist Digna Ochoa exemplifies this<sup>35</sup>. López Dóriga requested a fragment of Canal 6 de Julio's video material of an interview with Ochoa to be broadcast nationwide (Mendoza Interview).

Mexican television paid little attention to the constant threats received by Ochoa. On the contrary, Canal 6 de Julio video makers produced a documentary in which they detailed the many legal cases assigned to Ochoa that involved human right abuses committed by

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<sup>35</sup> When Ochoa was murdered, authorities suggested she had committed suicide. Knowing that only Canal 6 de Julio had a videotaped interview with Ochoa, López Dóriga contacted the collective to request the tape in year 2000.

military and police forces. In an interview, Ochoa narrates her life surrounded by anonymous death threats.

Another example of these interactions was the release of *Tlatelolco* in 2002.

Fragments of this documentary were broadcast on television. Those video clips appeared on Televisa's news analysis show *Círculo Rojo*, on López Dóriga's newscast and on a public TV station, Canal 11 (Mendoza Interview). Mendoza has mentioned another collaboration with Clío, publishing company that also produces the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX* and *México Nuevo Siglo* for Televisa to be discussed in the next chapter (Interview).

Mendoza indicates that those collaborations have been fair and professional.

Canal 6 de Julio has also developed a series of relationships and collaborations with NGOs. Some of them have even co-produced documentaries with Canal 6 de Julio. As part of these collaborations, these NGOs would sign a distribution agreement to disseminate these videos. Nancy Ventura mentions among those co-producers the human rights network Todos los Derechos para Todos (All rights to All), and the human rights center Miguel Agustín Pro, A.C., as partners of Canal 6 de Julio (Interview). Moreover, Canal 6 de Julio co-produced with Memoria y Verdad, A.C. the documentary *Halcones: Terrorismo de Estado (Halcones: State Terrorism, 2006)* about another student massacre perpetrated by the repressive apparatus of paramilitary groups deployed by the Mexican government in 1971 during the Luis Echeverría administration.

An important collaboration that led to *Romper el Cerco*'s Internet distribution is the one between Canal 6 de Julio, Chiapas Media Project/Promedios and Chiapas Indymedia. Toward the end of the Fox administration, federal police forces, working in tandem with State of Mexico police squads, brutally repressed the townspeople of San Salvador Atenco. This was part of a series of clashes between the State of Mexico police and a group of these

villagers. On May 4 2006, police forces employed brutal and indiscriminate force against many villagers and anybody in the area. Several Mexican television newscasts would present this act of repression in an uncritical manner. Through coordinated efforts, Canal 6 de Julio and Promedios quickly produced an emergency documentary. Chiapas Indymedia's website posted a free 47-downloadable video documentary that immediately circulated through the Internet. A networking effort among alternative media was countering the misinformation presented by Mexican television.

### **Canal 6 de Julio and Promedios**

The collaboration between Canal 6 de Julio and Promedios serves as way to contrast both types of video documentary distribution with each other. Basically, Promedios, best known as Chiapas Media Project, is a transnational initiative with offices in Chicago and three sites in Mexico, with international funding, centers with satellite communications, and an Internet video distribution aimed to transnational audiences through a polished website<sup>36</sup>. The project led by documentary filmmaker Alexandra Halkin intends to facilitate video resources to the Zapatista communities in Chiapas to produce their own documentaries which have also improved communication among communities (Smith 117-18). Individual and institutional prices of these short video documentaries are 3 and 9 times higher than Canal 6 de Julio's prices for documentaries on DVD format<sup>37</sup> (Chiapas Media Project/Promedios; Canal 6 de Julio "Tienda"). Also, the English version of Promedios's video catalog differs greatly from the Spanish version. The English version video catalog shows more video productions with higher prices than those found in the Spanish version, which does not

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<sup>36</sup> Promedios is an organization that trains indigenous people in video production to document abuses. These documentaries are distributed worldwide. Thus, this organization differs in objective from Canal 6 de Julio.

<sup>37</sup> A Canal 6 de Julio documentary on DVD costs around \$10 dollars.

immediately show video prices as its English counterpart. Therefore, the Internet distribution of Chiapas Media Project or Promedios, is primarily conceived as a transnational enterprise, for international audiences, not necessarily a domestic market. Promedios works from the very local to the transnational, overlooking most Mexican audiences. Conversely, Canal 6 de Julio is a project that focuses on issues that affect Mexican society at large, and is intended for a national audience, even if the documentaries are about rural communities. Canal 6 de Julio's distribution has reached universities in the United States and Europe, but its aim is chiefly a Mexican audience. While Promedios' distribution takes place through the Internet and international video festivals, Canal 6 de Julio has opted for multiple, but domestic, distribution strategies.

### **Other video initiatives**

Around 2003, there were other independent distribution initiatives in Mexico. Francisco Taboada directed and distributed the video documentary *Los Últimos Zapatistas* (*The Last Zapatistas*, 2002). Taboada, his own distributor, sold more than 5,000 documentaries by 2003. Audiences in rural towns and in international festivals have seen and enjoyed *Los Últimos Zapatistas* (Huerta "Zapatistas" 2; Taboada Interview). Gregorio Rocha would prefer to create, along with colleagues, a transnational independent distributor, *Subcine* to distribute his video documentary *Los Rollos Perdidos de Pancho Villa* (*The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa*, 2003) in the United States (Interview). Another video project that has launched its own video distribution is the one led by Oscar Meléndez under the name *La Rana del Sur* (Toussaint "Memoria"). Also, in 2006 as part of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's presidential campaign, the video documentary *¿Quién es el Señor López?* (*Who is Mr. López?*, 2006) directed by Luis Mandoki was distributed through bookstores, newsstands and many other



places. Mandoki claims that more than one million units were sold (Notimex). To put this in context, the most successful DVD titles in 2005 were *The Incredibles* (Bird, 2004) with around 700,000 units ("Expand" 6). A DVD film or video title is commercially released with a minimum of 5,000 copies, but those considered commercially successful sell between 15,000 and 30,000 units ("Series" 12). Interesting enough, when Canal 6 de Julio's *Tlatelolco* was released through a wider distribution thanks to *La Jornada* and newsstands, this documentary sold more than 30,000 units (Mendoza Interview). When political and economic barriers permit, video documentary distribution tends to expand.

### **Technology**

Technology has not always been on the side of Canal 6 de Julio's distribution, which has also created some tensions. During the first era, due to legal barriers, some VHS duplication companies would not accept a work order from Canal 6. Then, there were times in which these video activists would have to resort to a slow and precarious in-house duplication process. Moreover, the transition from VHS tape to DVD was not smooth.

By 2003, several bookstores were no longer accepting products on VHS format. Producing a DVD would imply a higher investment due to additional production processes. They included a cover design and programming menus, and producing special features. In addition, DVD duplication companies would set a minimum volume of reproduction at a thousand units (Ventura Interview). One advantage of VHS technology, Ventura notes, was the possibility of requesting little by little a few hundred copies of a documentary instead of making a larger investment on duplication right from the start (Interview). In contrast to DVD technology, the Internet has aided Canal 6's marketing and selling processes since 2002. At the end of the third era, Canal 6 de Julio video makers have taken advantage of the almost

ubiquitous attributes of the worldwide web. However, only 20 percent of the Mexican population, over 100 million inhabitants, had access to one of the 7 million computers connected to Internet in 2006.<sup>38</sup> It is still too early to say if this is the beginning of a new era for this collective.

### **Cultural intermediaries and discourses**

Cultural intermediaries and a discourse on the documentary genre have assisted Canal 6 de Julio and its videos in seizing a position within the Mexican audiovisual field. Opinion leaders, writers, and academics, among others, have acted as cultural intermediaries sanctioning the value of these documentaries. This group of personalities has ushered audiences to these documentaries stressing the relevance of these contesting videos. In the premieres of Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries, opinion leaders often introduce the new documentary during this special event. On January 29, 1994, Carlos Monsiváis introduced *La Guerra de Chiapas* along with the renowned journalists José Reveles and Roberto Zamarripa. While Monsiváis underscored how Canal 6 de Julio's video makers had taken the responsibility to document the most relevant episodes of recent Mexican history, Zamarripa rhetorically asked why Mexican audiences could not see this documentary in one of Televisa's TV channels (Haw n. p.). Through their comments, intellectuals assign value and prestige to Canal 6 de Julio and their documentaries.

Many of these intellectuals have also championed the defense of Canal 6 de Julio's right to distribution. On October 2, 1989, forty notable citizens published a public announcement in *La Jornada* demanding the government, after one year of excuses, to concede to *Crónica de un Fraude* its official registration in the public film database (Alba n.

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<sup>38</sup> Source: Asociación Mexicana de Internet. <http://ampici.org.mx/>. 20 May 2008

p.). When Canal 6 de Julio's offices were raided, a group of filmmakers publicly condemned such acts of intimidation demanding the preservation of freedom of speech (Quiroz 3E). These intermediaries not only help to clear the road these documentaries travel to reach an audience in the absence of marketing campaigns, and professional distributors, these old cultural intermediaries legitimize Canal 6's production and distribution in the Mexican video space.

Canal 6 has also devised its own strategies to legitimate its own position as documentary producer, and its distribution of documentaries. During the first period, the collective made an adamant defense of its constitutional right to distribute its videos. Through those statements, Canal 6 de Julio video makers made clear they knew that the Mexican legal system was on their side. Moreover, they challenged Mexican authorities by continuing the distribution of their documentaries. Canal 6 de Julio's members have also articulated a discourse in favor of contesting videos and oppositional documentaries claiming a right to enter wider distribution. That discourse clashes with another one that describes documentary films and videos as limited in audience appeal and only suitable to educated viewers.

Distributors, filmmakers, and academics have insisted in the lack of appeal in documentaries as well as the need of education to appreciate them. Everardo Contreras, executive of the distributor Zafra Video, acknowledges that documentaries have reemerged in recent years. However, he promptly adds, "but it is not 100 percent a commercial product" (Interview). Although Contreras believes fiction works better than documentaries in commercial terms, he does admit that this fact has to do more with the way the business works than with issues of quality.

In this debate, filmmakers and film officials give more weight to the level of education as an obstacle to documentary distribution. Filmmaker Juan Francisco Urrusti

concedes that in order to have a taste for documentaries, viewers need a certain level of education (Interview). In a similar manner, Cineteca Nacional official Ángeles Sánchez asserts that there is no documentary culture in Mexico to draw large audiences to watch these films and videos (Interview). Talking about alternative video distribution, John Downing speculates that the problem may reside on “the lack of cultural preparation to engage with their subject matter- because they are not presented in the blockbuster style that U.S. audiences have been trained to value” (197). However, that cultural capital that Downing considers necessary to appreciate a documentary correspond to a process of familiarization with the genre rather than learning specific aesthetic codes.

It is possible to extrapolate the positions of Canal 6 de Julio’s documentaries and the ones from commercial distributors with what Pierre Bourdieu says about documentaries and TV journalism. Bourdieu asserts that:

“... real information, analysis, in-depth interviews, expert discussions, and serious documentaries lose out to pure entertainment ... To justify this policy of demagogic simplification (which is absolutely and utterly contrary to the democratic goal of informing or educating people by interesting them), journalists point to public’s expectations. But in fact they are projecting onto the public their own inclinations and their own views” (Television 3).

Thus, journalists tend to act as some distributors do. That is, they filter content based on market criteria. This is replicated in video distribution channels when viewers’ surveys denote preferences that are “ more diversified and complex than is assumed by those who divide them into the educated and the entertained” (García Canclini Consumers 120). In the risky business of cultural industries, commercial video distributors try to reduce the levels of

uncertainty by eliminating some alternative options among the repertoire available to audiences.

Canal 6 de Julio videomakers mobilize their own discourses on the documentary. Carlos Mendoza has affirmed that “the aversion to the documentary genre is artificially constructed and the origin of such an imposition is easier to find in the offices of cultural bureaucrats than among viewers at a movie theatre or in front of a television set (“Limosnero” 56). Mendoza’s comments confront those arguments that consider documentaries only appealing to educated individuals as if these viewers were the only ones able to grasp the importance of social injustice. “Those are pretexts,” says Mendoza, “to justify evading a national reality ... the masters of power and money do not like when filmmakers approach issues of such a contrasting country like Mexico” (Interview). A revealing anecdote is the fact that *Crónica de un Fraude* circulated in rural areas along with an audiotape, not produced by Canal 6, with a translation in Purépecha, an indigenous language (Flores Vega 94). Thus, Canal 6 de Julio video makers often engage in a critique against discourses that attempt to explain the limited distribution of documentaries on educational problems and lack of commercial appeal. Once again, smoke screens work to conceal the many political and economic interests involved that deter the distribution of social documentaries.

As he discusses TV journalism, Bourdieu also wonders how to meet the democratic endeavor of disseminating information. Bourdieu explains:

The more complex an idea – because it has been produced in an autonomous world – the more difficult it is to present to the larger world. To overcome this difficulty, producers in their little citadels have to learn how to get out and fight collectively for optimum conditions of diffusion and for ownership of the relevant means of diffusion. This struggle has to take place as well with teachers, with unions,

voluntary associations, and so on, so that those on the receiving end receive an education aimed at raising their level of reception ... the goal of education is to offer the means of becoming a good citizen, of putting individuals in a position to understand law, to understand and to defend their rights, to set up unions ... We must work to universalize the conditions of access to the universal. (Television 66)

Bourdieu's exposition finds certain resonance with the endeavors of a collective like Canal 6 de Julio, especially when he talks about the diffusion, or distribution of symbolic capital, which could be mobilized by documentaries. Documentaries as counter information also attempt to disseminate knowledge. However, Carlos Mendoza argues that the collective's documentaries construct arguments in simple terms, devoid of complex theories or Marxist-Leninist ideas since the collective's members are not formed in that rhetoric (Fernández 66). Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries are about informing individuals about how to become citizens, especially in the sense that Clemencia Rodríguez (2001) argues for the enactment of citizenship. Then, Canal 6 de Julio's goal of a larger distribution does not seem anymore as a mere whim. However, there are risks of co-optation involved in a large distribution. Yet, the major problems will always be those imposed by political and economic forces. If the distribution of social documentaries is limited, it is not inherently due to the documentaries themselves, or a problem with an uneducated audience.

### **Finance and longevity**

During almost two decades as alternative media, Canal 6 de Julio's video activists have faced two intertwined conflicts or dilemmas around their video project and its hybrid distribution strategies. Chris Atton makes a fundamental observation: "Funding – when it does not come from readers or explicit supporters of the alternative press – is looked upon

with some suspicion” (Atton 36). Then, alternative media does not treat their viewers as consumers, but as supporters.

Among alternative media scholars, sustainability through certain levels of commercialization of media products, or simply put, an economic transaction exchanging a symbolic good for currency, it is clearly accepted. Several video collectives including Canal 6 de Julio have been selling their videos on the street as part of their efforts to sustain their alternative activities. DeeDee Halleck accounts for this practice among Asian collectives such as the environmental group Green Team (388). As mentioned previously, there were models of funding such as video subscriptions, a strategy deployed by Teleanálisis.

The key is to understand the economic transaction that occurs between producer and supporter from another angle. Rafael Roncagliolo talks about the *alterative*, a power of transformation (207). In this sense, Clemencia Rodríguez explains that within radical democracy contesting hegemonic discourses is a political action that alters symbolic production, use value, not material production, or exchange value (150). Thus, the transaction that takes place when viewers acquire oppositional documentaries is not simply a commercial act. It is a symbolic act, a political action of supporters, of citizens.

Néstor García Canclini deploys several ideas to explain consumption as a political act (Consumers 45-47). His argument is distilled down as the following. First, the market is more than simply where exchange of commodities takes place. It is a site of more complex sociocultural interactions. In the market, symbolic goods, such as documentaries, go from “the individual possession of isolate objects” to “the collective appropriation” via relations of solidarity. Moreover, commodities do not have an inherent commercial attribute. Objects could become commercial commodities. Commodities could lose their commercial value, and gain once again their use value.

Thus, the distribution of Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries could be seen as a process whereby an alternative representation of current affairs and identities become part of a collectivity. Canal 6 de Julio's viewers act as supporters of those representations and their continuous production. They are altering the market, turning the market into a public space and the acquisition of a video into a political act.

This is not to say that tensions are resolved in the appropriation of industrial practices. There are always risks through these processes. Alternative media would continue to receive criticism as they operate with technologies that are industrial *per se* such as video, television, radio, or the Internet. What these media projects are doing is altering those processes in a way that subvert the corporatist, capitalist methods and goals.

Since the beginning of operations, Canal 6 de Julio video makers have not sought to make a business out of their video documentary production and distribution. They are mostly academics who do not attempt to make a living out of this collective. Moreover, these video activists have frequently stressed the video duplication process in effort to reach a large base of viewers over actual video sales. Yet, they confront problems sustaining their collective. The reproducibility of symbolic goods has become a threat. Canal 6 de Julio will continue to confront this dilemma between the possibility of an open and free distribution, eliminating all signs of artificial scarcity, and the goal of remaining an independent and autonomous producer. Moreover, in their search for independence, these video makers reject state subsidies and other official privileges. However, this does not mean that they oppose progressive media policies if they are implemented to decentralize distribution and production processes in Mexico (Interview). In the meantime, they have simply underscored the importance of an alternative video production solely funded by their supporters. These



documentarians encourage their base of viewers to keep sustaining their project through the acquisition of contesting documentary videos, as citizens, and as a political action.

In part, Canal 6 de Julio experienced instability during its first era due to an initial state of uncertainty. Carlos Mendoza has admitted that in 1989 nobody in the collective thought of Canal 6 de Julio as a long-lived project, therefore, no plans existed beyond the point of making a couple of documentaries (Cuéllar). Many factors affected those first years: censorship; changing production styles from a TV format parodying newscasts to a documentary form; producing videos of *coyuntura*, that is, emergency videos in support of movements, but also in-depth research documentaries; and from borrowing video equipment to the purchase of their own through the only NGO's donation they have received. During those years, the collective experience a state of uncertainty, urgency and emergency that partially explains devising distribution strategies with conflicting goals. While these video activists took advantage of technology to disseminate widely their counter-informative documentaries, they soon realized the risks in not being able to make their production self-sustainable. When they seek the support of their sympathizers, they are always at risk in the commodification of culture. Here, I have attempted to analyze Canal 6 de Julio's distribution practices to identify problems and opportunities. The main struggle of this alternative video distribution is to reconcile the modes of video distribution with goals of sustainability, autonomy, and independence.

## Chapter 4

### **Walking with Dinosaurs: PRI, Televisa, Clío, and the made-for-television historical documentary**

On April 26, 1998, Canal 2 (Channel 2) aired a documentary on the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz administration and the 1968 student movement. *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* (*Díaz Ordaz and 1968*, 1998) performed surprisingly well for a 10pm schedule on a Sunday. With a national 20.5 rating, this documentary reached an audience level similar to those of popular telenovelas<sup>39</sup> and sporting events ("Va Krauze" 70-71; "Consiguen" 7). *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* was the first episode of a new historical documentary series, *México Siglo XX* (*Mexico, Twentieth Century*, 1998-2001), later renamed *México Nuevo Siglo* (*New Century Mexico*, 2001- )<sup>40</sup>. At the time, the mere presence of a historical documentary series on Televisa's flagship network was already a media event. The historical documentary series seemed part of a moment of media openness in Mexico in the mid 1990s. However, the degree at which *Mexico Siglo XX* has contributed to diversifying and democratizing television programming remains limited by its historical approach, and overshadowed by the converging interests of political, economic, and cultural elite classes in its production and distribution.

Three prominent figures were behind the launching of this historical documentary series. Two of them were Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, and his son Emilio Azcárraga Jean, top executives and main stockholders of Televisa, a media giant conglomerate. The third one was the renowned historian and cultural entrepreneur Enrique Krauze. The Azcárragas belong to the top of the Mexican economic elite with close links to the political class. Krauze is part of

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<sup>39</sup> Telenovelas are Latin American soap operas.

<sup>40</sup> In this chapter, for readability purposes, I mostly use the series title *México Siglo XX* to refer to both eras of this TV series unless otherwise noted.

Mexican intellectual elite whose ties with political and economic powers are ambiguous and contradictory.

During the first era of this historical documentary series, Krauze used his previous works, the multi-volume *Biografía del Poder* (*Biography of Power*, 1987) and *La Presidencia Imperial* (*The Imperial Presidency*, 1997), as the foundations to produce, write, and narrate these documentaries. Krauze claims that in the early 1990s he convinced the late Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, Televisa's top executive during 1973-1997, that culture could be a business and history could reach a mass audience (Paxman "History" 73). When Azcárraga Milmo passed away in 1997, his son Emilio Azcárraga Jean replaced him as Televisa's chief executive officer and chairman of the board. A year later, Azcárraga Jean gave the green light to the broadcasting of *México Siglo XX*. With the media giant Televisa as ally and business partner, Krauze's publishing and video company Clío<sup>41</sup> would produce more than two hundred historical documentaries in the following years (esmas.com). By 2006, the documentary series had stayed on Televisa's programming schedules for almost a decade. *México Siglo XX* has been the only documentary series on national commercial television, and the longest running documentary series in any television channel.

The purpose of this analysis is to show how the distribution of the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX* became possible as the interests of economic, cultural, and political elites crossed paths in a historical context that catalyzed its televised circulation. In my argument, I will point out how members of elites can act as cultural intermediaries deciding what documentaries can circulate through television airwaves. Néstor García Canclini argues that audiences do not find creative audiovisual works since the repertoire available is defined by "neoliberal rules of maximum profitability of mass commodities and

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<sup>41</sup> In Greek mythology, Clío is the muse of history.

the concentration of culture among select, decision-making elites” (Consumers 45). In this context, documentaries can find distribution as long as content and conditions are suitable to elites’ political, economic, and cultural interests. This circumstance evinces that the documentary genre does not carry inherent characteristics that confine it to the margins of distribution. Instead, the television distribution of this documentary series reveals how centralized powers shape under what conditions a documentary can get on the airwaves.

Here, I first present the contextualization of *México Siglo XX* as a case study. This contextualization covers the origins of Clío and *México Siglo XX*, and some contradictory aspects of this publishing and production house and its historical documentary series. In the second part, I explain how a specific historical context, the relevance of Televisa within the current state of the Mexican television industry, the role of elite groups, and a historical approach that have contributed to *México Siglo XX*’s television distribution.

Through my analysis, I will explain the circumstances that have made this documentary possible to be distributed on commercial television. With a growing video catalog that surpasses more than two hundred episodes, Clío has made a mixed contribution to the diversification of Mexican television. Clío has established a historical documentary series as a fixture in Televisa’s programming schedules that covers a variety of topics. The historical perspective of the series tends to reinforce general assumptions of the past, thus, finding a place within the mainstream.

Although I have only chosen about 30 documentaries from Clío’s historical series, I consider this group of documentaries to serve as a good sample to provide evidence of the tensions between attributes of diversity and plurality in their contents and attributes that tend to reinforce a mainstream notion of national history. In the absence of a national distribution market for television programming, I use the term television distribution to refer to the

dissemination of programs to television households through distribution technologies (McAnany and Wilkinson 13; Straubhaar 119). In terms of focus, I centered more on the first era of this historical documentary series, *México Siglo XX*, paying attention to the second era as a reference point to compare changes and continuities in this series through a time of transformations in Mexico.

### **Editorial Clío: origins and background**

In 1993, Enrique Krauze founded Editorial Clío in partnership with Televisa. Mexican companies Cemex and Femsa, respective leading corporations in the building material and beverage industries, also participated as business partners in this cultural enterprise (Aguilar "Buscan" 2). Clío's cultural business has an emphasis on the production of visual historical works in different formats: illustrated books, sticker albums, historical telenovelas, and historical documentaries. Illustrated books are often biographies of political figures or 1940s movie stars. Other books are pictorial versions of Krauze's work as historian. Sales numbers highlight the popularity of these easy-to-read history books. By 1997, Clío had already sold more than 10 million copies from 65 titles (Paxman "History" 73). Clío seldom publishes a book without pictures, but two examples are the complete works by Krauze's mentors, the historians Daniel Cosío Villegas and Luis González y González. Before pictorial history books became Clío's predominant business in the mid 1990s, historical telenovelas represented Clío's key business area.

In Mexico, the historical telenovela is a sub-genre that dates back to the late 1950s when they were produced by private television monopoly known as Telesistema Mexicano. Since then, historical telenovelas have often served political and economic interests. In the late 1960s, at the bequest of the government, Telesistema produced *La Tormenta* (*The Storm*,

1967) and *La Constitución* (*The Constitution*, 1969) (Fernández and Paxman 128-33). *La tormenta* aimed to repair any damage made to the historical figure of the national hero Benito Juárez by another telenovela *Maximiliano y Carlota* (1965). *La Constitución* sought to unite Mexican society after the 1968 tragic events in Tlatelolco.

Before Clío was established, Enrique Krauze and Fausto Zerón-Medina, later Clío's division head of historical telenovelas, collaborated with Televisa as consultants and scriptwriters in historical soap operas. Both historians worked in *Senda de Gloria* (*Path of Glory*, 1986). This telenovela narrates the beginnings of the PRI party. In the 1990s, Clío developed two historical telenovela scripts for Televisa. *El Vuelo del Águila* (*The Flight of the Eagle*, 1994), and *La Antorcha Encendida* (*The Flaming Torch*, 1996). *El Vuelo* was a biographical epic focused on General Porfirio Díaz who controlled Mexico's presidency during 1876-1911. The Mexican revolution would end the prolonged government of Díaz. Yet, Clío would present Porfirio Díaz in a positive light underlining progress and modernity during his tenure. In this telenovela, Díaz was, more than a dictator, an incorruptible hero.

This representation of Díaz was consonant with neoliberal policies the Mexican government had implemented at the time. By the early 1990s, the State was breaking with its revolutionary past. The benefits of economic liberalism to achieve modernization were replacing revolutionary ideals. According to some authors, *El Vuelo* rehabilitated Díaz's role in Mexican history and gave legitimacy to the long-lasting hegemony of the PRI party (Chassen-López 107; Rodríguez Cadena 50). The historical telenovela added luster to Televisa programming schedule in part thanks to the professional historical research done to depict those historical times more accurately. Televisa has also used this type of telenovela to counter criticism against programming schedules dominated by trivial topics, and often, low production values (Rodríguez Cadena 51). Through the historical telenovela, Televisa has

tried to gain prestige by investing in high production values and in consultations of experts. These productions have also helped to add prestige and legitimacy to Televisa's dominant position in the Mexican TV industry. In a similar way, *México Siglo XX* became an attractive series for Televisa.

The idea of producing historical documentaries for Televisa occurred to Enrique Krauze while working on his book *La Presidencia Imperial* in the early 1990s. However, Krauze had begun tinkering with the idea of producing documentaries since the 1980s. Two historical documentary series became revelations for him. One of them is *The World at War* (1974), a historical documentary series on World War II produced by the Imperial War Museum and Thames Television. Motivated by what he saw, Krauze contacted film historian and documentary filmmaker Kevin Brownlow to make inquiries about the production process (Jáquez 70-71).

The other historical documentary series that would influence Krauze's project is Ken Burns's *The Civil War* (1990). Krauze learned from *The Civil War* how the use of historical photographs could open immense possibilities for a made-for-television historical documentary (Paxman "History" 73). In the early 1990s, Krauze pitched his idea to Emilio Azcárraga Milmo. After he received the support of Televisa's top officer, Krauze recruited a group of professional documentary filmmakers with the goal of taking advantage of filmic and photographic archives to visually illustrate the histories he had already accounted for in his published works. The development of the series would take about four years.

### **Tensions and contradictions: *México Siglo XX* historical documentary**

The distribution of *México Siglo XX* serves as a complex case study that exposes tensions between an attempt to diversify television content via the documentary genre, and

the constraints on these efforts. Krauze has said that he envisioned *México Siglo XX* as a contribution to the democratization of television by bringing culture to a mass audience (qtd. in Jáquez 70-71). However, *México Siglo XX*'s contribution to television "diversity" becomes more muddled as Krauze and Clío's autonomy and independence come into question.

For instance, *México Siglo XX* became the first television program to present an account of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre on Mexican television (Krauze "Carta" 78-82). *México Siglo XX*'s *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* pays attention to these tragic events when the authoritarian Mexican government under Díaz Ordaz crushed a student movement using the army and paramilitary groups. The renowned journalist Miguel Granados Chapa praised this documentary highlighting that this first episode of the new documentary series *México Siglo XX* episode would shed light to that crucial moment of Mexican history ("El Estado" 21). In that context, this documentary appears to bring a revealing perspective on these events. However, in the end, *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* only rearticulates the known historical version that Díaz Ordaz was the only responsible of these atrocities. In this way, this documentary avoids exploring any responsibility from the Mexican army or the then Minister of Interior Luis Echeverría in the massacre. Moreover, *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* also plays down the death toll when it speculates that less than 70 people were killed when other accounts have mention at least 200 dead or more (Gallegos "El filme" 3; Maciel 200; Paz 94). In similar terms, *México Siglo XX* has treated other relevant topics on broadcasting television, like the Zapatista movement in *Chiapas: la Guerra y la Paz (Chiapas: War and Peace, 2004)*. While these documentaries provide new and relevant information, in the end, they rearticulate mainstream ideas on Mexican history and recent events. *México Siglo XX* in its second era, *México Nuevo Siglo*, has also covered social issues like a study on women's issues within Mexican culture in *Ni Princesa, ni Esclava (Neither Princess, nor Slave, 2004)* with relative success.



Political, economic, and cultural interests along with constraints in representing historical accounts within television practices are all factors that play a role in defining who gets to tell a particular kind of history. The confluence of interests held by the Azcárragas and Enrique Krauze found an expression in the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX*. In this way, members of political, economic, and cultural elite classes, share institutionalized and dominant positions in their respective fields, which prompt them to find coincidences in their interests (Bourdieu Distinction 234). These elites have exacerbated contradictions in the cultural production of historical documentaries when they show a disposition to compromise cultural endeavors for economic and political gains. The historical documentary series *Mexico Siglo XX* has offered room for a degree of plurality in terms of themes and styles. Yet, *México Siglo XX*'s narratives tend toward an encompassing national narrative. This national narrative works as a teleology of Mexican history that sees democracy as its final destination.

Clío may appear as an independent production company from Televisa in the opening credits of each *México Siglo XX* episode. However, Televisa has a financial stake in the production of these historical documentaries as Clío's business partner. Despite this partnership, Clío executives have claimed financial and creative autonomy from Televisa. To highlight Clío's economic independence, Luis Lupone, Clío's head of video production, has stressed the fact that Enrique Krauze has the responsibility of finding sponsors for *México Siglo XX*, not Televisa (Interview). However, some of the private sponsors are part of the partnership that formed Clío: Cemex and Femsa. Other sponsors are official institutions such as the Department of Education, and the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS), among others (Castro "Disputa" 72). Thus, Clío's partners practice a form of patronage while the State appears to partially subsidize this documentary series. In addition, at least in 2005, Clío's sales and marketing staff were using Internet accounts with the suffix *televisa.com*.

Adolfo Rodríguez, Clío's sales and distribution director, has explained those email accounts as a consequence of the partnership between Televisa and Clío (Email). In an opposite direction, other information reveals frictions between Televisa and Clío.

In 2004, Televisa imposed a lien to Clío's properties when the publishing company could not cover a \$10 million pesos loan. However, the relations between Krauze and Televisa were on good terms since Krauze had a seat in Televisa's board of directors and the goal of the lawsuit was simply to retain the rights to that loan (Aguilar "Buscan" 2). Since Televisa does not have full control over Clío (Cemex and Femsa also have a stake), the publishing house executives could argue certain autonomy from the television conglomerate up to a certain level. Yet, these tensions show the lengths Televisa would go to protect its financial interests.

In terms of diversity of producers, *México Siglo XX* also presents tensions and contradictions. First, Enrique Krauze's work as a historian served as the backbone of this documentary series during the first era. During its second phase, *México Siglo XX* would continue to follow Krauze's editorial perspective as a historian (Lupone Interview). For Claudio Lomnitz, Krauze's historical work is the result of "the concentration of cultural power in the hands of a few intellectuals" that advances a neoliberal revision of history while leaving untouched the main ideas in a national history (1064). Even though, Enrique Krauze is not the only one writing and producing historical accounts for *México Siglo XX*, his historical vision tends to guide other contributors into the production of documentaries in line with a mainstream perspective. However, Krauze has said, "My books are indeed mine, these documentaries are a team effort" (qtd. in Lazcano "Aparecerá" 14).

In Mexico where opportunities for professional documentary filmmakers are scarce, *México Siglo XX* has created a site whereby many documentary filmmakers have been able to

maintain and continue a professional career. Many documentary filmmakers, seasoned and emerging, have worked for *México Siglo XX*. For instance, Juan Francisco Urrusti, who directed *El pueblo mexicano que camina*, also directed for Clío, *López Mateos: historia de un seductor* (*López Mateos: the story of a seducer*, 1998). Nicolás Echevarría, director of *María Sabina*, *El niño Fidencio* and *Cabeza de Vaca*, produced *La Cristiada* (2002), a three-part documentary based on research conducted by the prestigious French historian based in Mexico, Jean Meyer. Rafael Montero who directed the documentary *El eterno retorno: testimonios de los indios Kikapú* (*The eternal return: testimonies of the Kikapú indians*, 1985), for the National Indigenous Institute, directed Clío's *Miguel de la Madrid: el camino recto* (*Miguel de la Madrid: the straight and narrow path*, 1999). *México Siglo XX* also broadcast Montero's *El eterno retorno* in 1999. More recently, Everardo González, 2002 Mayahuel film award winner for *La canción del pulque*, has directed ten Clío documentaries. One of them is *Madero y Carranza: el apóstol y el barón* (*Madero y Carranza: the apostle and the baron*, 2004). Antonino Isordia, filmmaker of the acclaimed and spine-chilling documentary *1973*, has directed seven documentaries for Clío. One of them is *Retratos de la educación* (*Portraits of education*, 2005). Yet, this is also a process in which independent filmmakers become indirectly assimilated by a large corporation.

In addition, through the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX*, Clío has made the documentary genre on television highly visible. Luis Lupone underscores that *México Siglo XX* has debunked the myth that cultural programming, in specific documentaries, cannot appeal to a large audience (Interview). Lupone highlights companies outside the group of aforementioned sponsors that requested to buy airtime within the series' broadcast such as Banco Nacional de México (National Bank of Mexico or Banamex). Even

more relevant is *México Siglo XX*'s appeal to summon a large number of viewers in front of TV screens.

Clío executives thought at first that the series would appeal to a demographic segment of males above 30 with a medium or high education level. However, audience studies have shown by 2003 that the age of viewers range from 20 to 40, and older, representing different classes, and female audiences stand out as an important group (Lupone Interview). Even though rating levels are not as stellar as they were at first, the series has sustained numbers between 6 to 10 points, which are still respectable for a Sunday night schedule (A. Rodríguez Email). Then, in front of this evidence of an abundance of documentaries on mainstream television and their high visibility, the question changes from “is the distribution of Mexican documentaries limited in Mexico?” to “what producers get to distribute what kind of documentaries on commercial television?”

Through the years, Clío has produced a large repertoire of documentaries for the series *México Siglo XX*. Some are clearly historical. Others focus on social issues. Some documentaries are more critical than others. In that body of production, signs of diversity often compete with reactionary points of view found in the mainstream. Therefore, some documentaries end up reinforcing the perpetuation of the status quo. Diversity involves producers, styles, genre, but also ideological underpinnings. For instance, most documentaries follow a generic structure that consists of a voice over narrator serving as a thread that connects images and narrative. Images are usually archival material, including paintings, photographs, documents, and film or video footage. The documentaries are typically in montage sequences accompanied by a musical score. However, within this common structure, several documentary filmmakers have developed their own rhetorical devices, often experimenting with editing choices such as transitions and montages. This is

the case of Luis Lupone's *Díaz Ordaz y el 68*. Other filmmakers have experimented with animation, such as Paulina del Paso's *Ni Princesa, ni Esclava*.

Most reviews of *México Siglo XX* and *México Nuevo Siglo* in the press have been positive. Some editorial journalists welcomed and praised the arrival of this historical documentary series to mainstream television. They saw in the first episode, *Díaz Ordaz y el 68*, the proof that Mexican audiences were willing and eager to engage in “intelligent TV programming” and “cultural television,” against the abundance of soccer matches and soap operas (Bartolomé 22; Musacchio 3). Historical documentaries stand out as diverse content in an ocean of mass-produced entertainment riddled with telenovelas, reality shows, and sporting events. Yet, a few journalists have underscored problems in the content and perspectives this documentary series tries to advance as Mexico's history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For the fifth anniversary of the series, now renamed *México Nuevo Siglo*, television critic Alvaro Cueva presented two competing and possible readings of the series. On the one hand, *México Siglo XX* could be considered a diverse series, a program that has provided opportunities to numerous filmmakers and researchers, and a serious and formal treatment of history. On the other hand, *México Siglo XX* is a boring, solemn, and unilateral perspective of national history, that has become a family business for the Krauzes (Cueva).

Televisa and Krauze intend to produce historical documentaries for a mass audience as both an economic and cultural enterprise. In that process, Krauze is at risk within the struggles in the intellectual field for simplifying for the masses the complexity of a historical narrative. What Krauze finds at stake is his own independent and autonomous position, and by association that of his publishing and video production company Clío, and the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX*.

### **The proper times for historical documentaries**

In 1998, Televisa found in the distribution of Enrique Krauze's *México Siglo XX* another strategy to restore its credibility and prestige in a new competitive television environment. In 1997, Televisa started to participate more clearly in a moment of media openness as political and economic transformations were creating an ambience of uncertainties for the giant media conglomerate (Lawson 110). Two factors stand out as main contributors for this situation: a new competitive environment in commercial television, and the declining political power of the hegemonic PRI party. *México Siglo XX*'s distribution is partially a consequence of these events.

The arrival of a new competitor to Mexican television ignited a trend toward media openness. This trend would prove to be ambiguous, contentious, and temporal. In 1993, the Mexican government sold *Imevisión* to private capital. The sale of the government's television system formed by national networks *Canal 13* and *Canal 7* was part of neoliberal policy trends, which had been advancing since the early 1980s. Televisa was no longer the only player in the broadcasting television industry. Soon, Televisa would confront for the first time in decades real competition from a new television corporation, TV Azteca.

TV Azteca found in Televisa's lack of credibility a competitive advantage. For years Televisa's role as mouthpiece of the authoritarian PRI regime had tarnished the media conglomerate's credibility as a reliable source of information. TV Azteca restructured and incorporated improvements to *Imevisión*'s old news organization to produce impartial news in the race for ratings (Hernández and McAnany 395,97-99). Televisa eventually reacted by presenting critical news in the mid 1990s. One example is Ricardo Rocha's *Detrás de la Noticia* weekly news magazine (1996-1999). However, Chappel Lawson has argued that only

after the death of Emilio Azcárraga Milmo in 1997, Televisa finally showed truly balanced news coverage (94). Media openness would be revealed later as an intermittent phenomenon.

*México Siglo XX* entered mainstream television during the 1990s when there was a trend toward mass media democratization. However, different factors made this moment of media openness limited, even if fueled by competition, professional practices, and political changes. The same media corporations, which would appear to promote independent journalism, would also resort to old practices and inertia from the past. Mainstream television would still conform to the current hegemonic ideology. Journalists have detailed how mainstream television presented a bias against left forces and popular unrest during those years. Televisa and TV Azteca would limit coverage on issues not favorable to the government, vilify social movements, ignore PRI authorities' responsibility on tragic events, or charge against governments stemming from left parties (Albarrán and Ambriz 18). Even though he has argued in the past that the moment of media openness would continue in the future, Chappel Lawson concedes that these practices were taking place within a moment of media openness. Lawson notes that "biases against leftist opposition groups remained" (110). He provides as examples unfair news coverage for two subjects: the 1999 student protests at the National University, and Mexico City's PRD government, the leftist political party. This ambivalent moment of media openness would allow the distribution of the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX* as a sign of critical content and prestige.

To the contrary, newscasts continued favorably framing of the government's repressive actions against popular movements. These and other practices would persist hindering media openness on Mexican television in the following years. In 2002, TV Azteca would take over the UHF TV station Canal 40 after a failed alliance between these two companies, and with the approval of the new regime of the Fox administration (Gómez "TV

Azteca" 81; Lawson 97). Unfortunately, Canal 40 was one of the last strongholds of independent and critical programming in Mexican television, with some documentary-style content.

This consolidation of media concentration contributed to the decline of media openness and diversity of viewpoints in Mexican TV. Little by little, TV Azteca would begin to resemble Televisa's programming content, and share similar political and economic interests (Hernández and McAnany 395). When convenient, TV Azteca and Televisa would align with the Mexican government. Authors like Ken Wilkinson and Florence Toussaint have observed that in Mexico, cronyism, corruption, repression, and lack of political will toward authoritarianism have hindered efforts to democratize television around the turn of the century ("Democracy" 279-307; *Las campañas*" 55). Old ties between governments and television corporations would prove to be resilient to the new transformations taking place.

A second factor that contributed to the television distribution of *México Siglo XX* was a process of electoral reforms and democratic progress that debilitated the PRI party. The hegemonic PRI, for years Televisa's political ally, would suffer two setbacks in the 1997 elections: the loss of the congressional majority and the loss of Mexico City mayor's office. For seven decades, the PRI regime centralized political, economic, and cultural powers to dominate as the uncontested political force. The PRI regime and the Carlos Salinas administration also attempted to present Mexico as a truly democratic nation during the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement talks. This would just be a simulation. The real wave of transformation would come even before the 1990s as an emergent civil society clamoring for democratic change had revitalized oppositional parties around the country in order to expose PRI's fraudulent tactics since the early 1980s (Gómez "TV Azteca" 58). These democratic processes translated in the mid 1990s into an electoral reform that debilitated the



PRI regime, paving the way for the other political parties to seize key positions in congress, and regional and local governments, and finally, the presidency.

Impelled by the transformations that took place in the political economic realm during the 1990s, Televisa no longer claimed loyalty to any political party. When Emilio Azcárraga Jean became Televisa's top executive, he distance himself from politics and described Televisa's interests exclusively in economic terms (Lawson 109). Once the television industry started to operate as a duopoly, Televisa tinkered with media openness and other strategies, but did not break with the PRI regime. The end of the PRI's political hegemony would become later a clear sign for Televisa's top executives to take a new course of action.

### **Televisa and ownership concentration in the Mexican television industry**

The changes and continuities in ownership concentration in the Mexican television industry in recent years also help explain under what circumstances *México Siglo XX* found television distribution through Televisa. Despite the fact that TV Azteca entered the fray in the Mexican television industry, some scholars have referred to Televisa as an emerging entity in the construction of a national culture, especially when the State has reduced its direct involvement in cultural production as part of neoliberal trends. Writing in 1996, Patrick Murphy noted that Televisa had become an “unlikely, but central, force in defining national culture” during a time when the State's flexible rhetoric of progress and modernization can be equated with “globalization, nationalism, and consumer democracy” (256). More recently, Wilkinson has highlighted Televisa's “more active role in promoting Mexico's cultural heritage” as a consequence of democratic changes and neoliberal policies that have altered the notions of what constitutes national culture, and identity as well as the revalorization of

popular culture ("Cultural Policy" 484). These observations stress a change in the kind of national culture that Televisa has promoted in a neoliberal environment. However, Televisa has always taken a prominent role in shaping Mexican culture, often with programming that resembles public television. One example is the Mexican version of *Sesame Street*, *Plaza Sésamo*. Another one is *Telesecundaria*, a collaboration with the Department of Education to broadcast middle school classes to rural areas. Those projects intend to legitimize Televisa's media power. Televisa's interests spread across multiple media platforms including radio, print media, film companies, cable and satellite television systems, an Internet portal, live entertainment, professional sports, gaming, and of course, broadcasting television.

Even after the implementation of neoliberal reforms on the television industry, Televisa has continued to hold a leading position. This is due to the limited scope of those reforms. Once the government sold its two television networks to the private investors, Televisa experienced fierce competition from a competitor for the first time. However, while these measures broke Televisa's monopoly, they still preserved the high level of ownership concentration in Mexican television. Mexican legislation and NAFTA capped foreign capital ownership on audiovisual industries to 49 percent, thus, raising economic barriers to new competitors and therefore, protecting Mexican TV networks (Galperin 632). Moreover, the government passed no reforms to end the control of more than one national network in the hands of a single television company. Thus, the monopoly simply became a duopoly. After the defeat of the PRI party, neoliberal attempts to privatize public television and increase ownership concentration have continued during the Fox administration.

During the transition period few months before Fox's inaugural address, the elected president tinkered with the possibility of selling all assets of public television to private capital. Interesting enough, Krauze was collaborating with Fox's transitional team at the time.

Krauze conducted a survey to test the waters. The results were a popular rejection against the privatization of public TV (Castro "15 mil" 72). Another case is the infamous *Ley Televisa* (Televisa Law).

In December 2005, in the context of the presidential campaigns, a congressman and former Televisa employee submitted to congress media legislation that would automatically grant to Televisa and TV Azteca the right to use the freed up frequencies in the analog-digital radio frequency transmission without the need to request a new concession (Lozano 472). This law would also permit an auction of the newly available digital spectrum for radio and television that would go to the highest bidder. The so-called *Ley Televisa* was also destined to annihilate public media. The House of Deputies took a fast track route to pass this law. However, popular outcry and a group of senators led by Javier Corral entered the fray against commercial television's lobbying campaign to pass this law. Despite these efforts, the senate approved this law. Then, Corral and his allies raised their case of the unconstitutionality of this media law framework before the Supreme Court. Consequently, the *Ley Televisa* faced its defeat at the highest instance of justice in the nation in June 2007 (Salazar 2; Cansino 15).

Today, Mexico's broadcasting television structure is a duopoly comprised by Televisa and TV Azteca. Televisa owns four national television networks, channels 2, 5, 4, and 9. TV Azteca owns two networks, Canal 13 and Canal 7. TV Azteca has progressively seized a considerable portion of the audience pie in 12 years. However, Televisa remains the undisputed leader capturing 71 percent of the national audience share, 70 percent of television advertising, and airing 83 of the top 100 television programs in 2006 (Televisa; Sánchez Ruíz "Audiovisual").

The Mexican television industry takes the form of an oligopoly when cable, satellite systems, state-owned, and public TV stations are factored in. Five media companies are in

control of 60 percent of the pay-television market in Mexico, and Televisa has financial stakes in two of them: Sky and Cablevisión (Sánchez Ruíz "Audiovisual"). In Sky, Televisa has a partnership with another two media giants: News Corp. and the Brazilian TV Globo. In Cablevisión, Televisa has a partnership with Telmex, the home telephone monopoly owned by one of the richest man in the world: Carlos Slim. In 2006, pay television had less than 25 percent of market penetration (Villamil "Nueva" 66; Aceves 10).

State or public television stations have not represented a significant competition to commercial television. In the past, Imevisión inefficiently attempted to parallel a commercial television model. Only a couple of sports and comedy programs would compete against Televisa's programming. Today, Mexican public television is a fragmented and limited television system that, almost as a contradiction, reaches most of its audiences thanks to cable and satellite services. In Mexico, public TV has become a private matter. Canal 11 and Canal 22 are the only two public television stations in the country with limited television reach, and strong ties to the government. Canal 11 only controls 3.1 percent of Mexican audiences, while only 0.7 of national audiences watch Canal 22 (Gómez "TV Azteca" 64). Outside of the Mexico City's metropolitan area, these stations need to rely on pay television. In addition, almost all states in Mexico own and operate a television stations with regional coverage. They account for 29 television stations across the country. Their operations are complex and hybrid. Programs can resemble commercial television, public television, or state television. It all depends on political and economic circumstances.

Broadcast television is the dominant medium among mass media industries in Mexico thanks to its audience reach, profitability, and as the prime source of information for Mexican audiences. In 2004, while broadcast television reached 98 percent of the population and took 65 percent of all paid advertising available, only 18 percent of the population

subscribed to cable or satellite systems, and 10 percent of paid advertising went to narrowcasting television (Sánchez Ruíz "Audiovisual"). The low penetration of cable and satellite television among the population is primarily due to level of poverty in Mexico. During 1994-2002, moderate poverty remained above a 50 percent level while extreme poverty was set barely above 20 percent by 2002 (World Bank "Press"). Considering that television is the most pervasive medium, half of the population relies on broadcasting television as its primary source of news and information, including 45 percent of the college educated segment (Lawson 96). Therefore, television largely plays an influential role in Mexico's society.

In a country where television is so prominent as a primary source of information and entertainment, issues of content diversity become crucial as a way to offer a variety of points of view in TV programming. However, the concentration of television ownership in Mexico has made a negative impact on programming diversity. Using Philip Napoli's model to assess plurality in television, José Carlos Lozano has found a lack of diversity in Mexican television in terms of sources and content (469-75). Sources include owners of channels and content while content involves genres and point of views. Lozano addresses two main problems. One is the high level of ownership concentration in Mexico favored by lax television legislation. Since the 1940s, media legislation has allowed the television industry to grow into a monopolistic or duopolistic structure without vertical integration restrictions (Lozano 469-70). Thus, the television industry has historically filled programming schedules with in-house productions and imports. Ownership concentration has eliminated incentives for local independent producers to develop TV programming and, thus, the possibility of a national distribution market for television content. Sánchez Ruíz has reached the same conclusion. When he refers to the Mexican television industry as an "industry of content," Sánchez Ruíz

highlights that this is an underdeveloped and undiversified industry due to the high levels of ownership concentration, especially in the production sector (Sánchez Ruíz "Audiovisual"). However, Sánchez fails to point that this further eliminates the possibility of a national distribution sector of television programming.

Independent producers working with television networks are rare in Mexico. When executives at TV Azteca were learning the ropes of television production, the company contracted independent producers such as Adela Producciones and Argos Producciones. These production houses came into existence specifically to produce television content for TV Azteca. These producers brought new formats, styles, and themes to Mexican television. For instance, Argos produced telenovelas with more realism than the typical Cinderella stories that Televisa was churning out every three months (Hernández and McAnany 403). However, TV Azteca would eventually end its relationship with Argos. In part, this was due to the fact TV Azteca owned the rights over the content produced by this independent company.

It is during this time of television innovation and media openness that Clío stepped into television by forming a semi-independent production company. That is, in alliance with Televisa. This is evidence of the levels of control and influence one dominant player in the industry can exert over new companies. Within these circumstances, *México Siglo XX*'s status as independent producer is problematic. In this sense, *México Siglo XX* exemplifies the degree of diversity and plurality that a highly concentrated television industry was willing to distribute in a new neoliberal environment. Audiences found a variety of genres, and topics posing no threats to a laissez faire economic environment in which few TV conglomerates will thrive. As David Hesmondhalgh has noted, media corporations pursue three types of interests: those of their businesses, those of their industries, and those of the political

economic system that allows them to flourish (Cultural Industries 62-63). Consequently, progressive messages advocating for cultural policies that could restrict oligopolistic practices would confront a more difficult time finding airtime, or they would simply not circulate at all through certain media channels. However, the tensions around diversity in *México Siglo XX* mirror the contradictory role Televisa has played throughout the years, even during its era as a virtual monopoly.

For years, critics have described Televisa as “the other Ministry of *Private Education*,” “the fifth state,” or “PRI’s Ministry of Propaganda” (Montoya and Rebeil 146; Sinclair “Neither” 352; Paxman “Hybridized”). In the late 1950s, the State passed media laws that encouraged the growth of a television monopoly in exchange for political favors. The Mexican government had understood the existence of a television monopoly as propagandistic tool for (Fernández and Paxman 91). In this way, the Mexican television monopoly became an effective media structure to disseminate propaganda, limit dissent, educate audiences, and construct a dominant view on current events—all this to preserve its political hegemony. Televisa and its antecedents accepted that arrangement to maintain its hegemonic position in the television field. For many decades, Televisa’s newscasts presented its “official story” of events as objective and professional broadcasting journalism. The most emblematic instance of this practice has been the infamous newscasts *24 Horas* (24 Hours) with the fixture presence of Jacobo Zabludovsky as news anchor.

Televisa has also used cultural programs to legitimate its commercial dominance. Often, television networks engage in programming that resembles public television as a public relations tool to reinforce their dominant position in the television field (Spigel 259). In the absence of a national public television system, Televisa has occasionally assumed those functions whether they serve as a public relations tool with neglected audience

segments or as way to collaborate with the government. *México Siglo XX* resembles those stale practices. Historical telenovelas only constitute one example. The government and Televisa have also joined forces in Telesecundaria, an educational program to broadcast middle high classes to rural areas only feasible through the reach of the commercial television monopoly. Telesecundaria started in 1968 through Telesistema Mexicano and Televisa continued broadcasting this educational programming until 1986 when the Mexican State launched its own satellite system (Montoya Martín del Campo and Rebeil Corella 143-44). These cultural projects often blurred boundaries between the role of the State and Televisa in relation to public and private television and the construction of a national culture.

There are several instances of this type of programming and I have previously mentioned two of them (Plaza Sésamo and Telesecundari), but there are more. Around 1989 and only for a few years, Televisa revamped one of its four television channels as a cultural television network, Canal 9 (Sinclair "Neither" 352). Despite the effort, programming was prone to a light approach to the notion of culture. During the 1990s, Televisa did not lose its vocation as public television and persisted on showing cultural programming. One of those examples was Televisa's *El Siglo XX: la Experiencia de la Libertad* (The 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The Experience of Freedom, 1990) under the leadership of the poet, essayist, and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz. Another instance is Plácido Domingo's *Operalia* in 1994, an international competition for opera singers, broadcast during Saturday nights.

At first *México Siglo XX* served mostly as a way to restore prestige and creditability in front of a new competitor. Now and then, the historical documentary series has also served to occasionally advance those interests pursued by hegemonic groups. Since the television industry has remained extremely concentrated, Televisa has not lost its dominant role in shaping public opinion and Mexican culture.



## **Documentary distribution through Mexican television**

*México Siglo XX*'s distribution not only exposes contradictions in ownership concentration, but also tensions when public television replicates the concentration of power found in politics and the national television industry. Even though documentaries circulate through three types of television in Mexico, commercial broadcasting, cable and satellite television, and public television, the Mexican documentary is barely visible.

In 2006, Jenaro Villamil contrasted the rising prominence of Mexican documentaries with the prevailing indifference of private Mexican television toward the genre ("Documental" 45). Other academics and filmmakers have concurred. Florence Toussaint has noticed the limited presence of the Mexican documentary through Mexican television, including public stations. Toussaint highlights two problems: the absence of independent producers and documentaries addressing political or social issues. The media scholar also notes that Mexican documentaries on television screens are usually focused on nature, wildlife, the sciences, or history while producers are either the State, the same public television, or Clío ("TV" 67). Carlos Mendoza has stated that no television networks or station in Mexico, either public or private, invest a penny to buy an independent Mexican documentary (Mendoza "Limosnero" 54). In this sense, *México Siglo XX* stands out as the only instance of documentary programming on commercial television.

The efforts that Mexican public television has made toward the distribution of Mexican documentaries have remained partial, limited, and problematic. Public television replicates the problems found in broadcasting and pay television systems. Through those practices, the only two public television stations in Mexico continue to curtail the entrance of independent producers as professional filmmakers on their own right. First, public television stations neglect to seek independent documentary production (Nava Interview; Quintero-

Mármol Interview). Second, if they broadcast a documentary production, these public television stations would either not pay for broadcasting fees, or they would pay a lower fee than the one offered to independent producers from abroad. Third, these public television stations only welcome independent documentary producers in the form of co-productions. This is an example of a tendency in Mexican television to control and concentrate all production efforts within a television organization instead of providing incentives for the growth of independent producers and their production houses. Fourth, public television stations have historically preferred to acquire documentaries from abroad due to the low costs of foreign television programs. However, it turns out that they often pay more for these productions than what they would offer to a national producer (Nava Interview). Finally, public television privileges documentaries on nature, wild life, sciences, and history.

According to Lupone, the *México Siglo XX* series has accomplished much more for the Mexican documentary than what public television has done (Lupone Interview). The State has not carried out comprehensive cultural policies to stimulate truly independent documentary production. Private and public television tend to assimilate independent documentary producer to either shape their productions or gain prestige for their products. There are no incentives for television networks to simply purchase and broadcast independent national documentaries. Even though documentary filmmakers confront similar problems in other countries, public policies in Spain and France have created incentives for continuous production and distribution of documentaries through television and movie theater venues (Mendoza "Limosnero" 54,56).

In contrast, Mexican media policies have done close to nothing to develop a market for this type of productions. IMCINE production head Carlos Taibo says that this film institution has started to adopt the DocTV Iberoamérica model, the expansion of a project

initiated by Brazil, to produce and broadcast independent documentaries on public television throughout Latin America (InterviewInterview). IMCINE is funding documentary projects for television assigning a \$100,000 production budget.

During 2003, I interviewed public station Canal 22's planning and programming manager Eduardo Nava, and public station Canal 11's programming director, Enrique Quintero-Mármol. From those interviews, it became clear that public television stations prefer to allocate their scarce budgets to in-house productions and co-productions, as a way to indicate they are producing content. They also seek imports as a way to associate themselves with prestigious international producers. Both executives argue that their TV stations have an interest in producing documentaries. Yet, they raised their case by talking about their own productions and their documentary imports. Enrique Quintero-Mármols boasts about how many Mexican documentary filmmakers, such as Carlos Bolado, Jorge Prior, and Joaquín Barruecos have found production opportunities within Canal 11 (Interview). Nava affirms that for Canal 22 is cheaper to buy production in international markets. This TV executive argues that the independent Mexican documentary is a rare species, confronting expensive costs due to inefficient and unprofessional practices (Interview). However, Nava explains that Canal 22 has invested in expensive co-productions with The Discovery Channel because they could bring some prestige to the station. Nava articulates an argument that affirms the standardized practices in Mexican television toward the control of production in national territory and the reliance on foreign productions. This explains in part why 60 percent of Canal 22's programming schedule depends on international products.

According to Quintero-Mármol, the independent documentary filmmaker in Mexico tries to recoup all costs in the first television contract (Interview). Quintero-Mármol suggests that documentaries, which merit a space on public television, require years of research and

production. Thus, Mexican filmmakers confront financial problems to sustain such projects. Canal 11 can only pay \$2,000 dollars for one-hour of a BBC documentary and not hundreds of thousands of dollars for a national documentary. Nava concedes that on Canal 22, international productions receive up to \$5,000 dollars, “Because they are excellent productions” explains the TV executive (Interview). At the time, I mentioned several quality documentary productions, which had not been seen on Mexican public television such as Francesco Tabone’s *Los Últimos Zapatistas*, and Carlos Mendoza’s *Tlatelolco: Las Claves de la Masacre*. Both executives replied in the same way: those independent filmmakers have not knocked at the doors of these public TV stations. Both productions would later appear on Canal 11’s *Abrelatas (Can-opener, 2003-present)* without economic compensation. This highlights another practice in television distribution in Mexico. The absence of a market tends to devalue the work of independent documentary filmmakers who have to agree on receiving no payment in order to see their documentaries on public television.

Several documentary filmmakers have experienced firsthand the unsupportive nature of public television stations. Luis Lupone has mentioned that he has seen at public television offices the voluminous files related to documentary imports and a miniscule file for national documentaries (Interview). Clío’s head of production Luis Lupone narrates the discrimination that occurs in public television against Mexican producers. In 1993, Lupone offered to Canal 11 a documentary on 1950s movie idol Pedro Infante. Lupone was asking for \$2,000 dollars to cover broadcasting rights. However, Flor Hurtado, then head of production, responded to him that with that amount Canal 11 could buy four documentaries from the BBC (qtd. in Mendoza "Limosnero" 54).

Like Lupone, other documentary filmmakers have also stressed that public television stations are not even willing to pay \$2,000 dollars for their productions. Carlos Mendoza

relates how a documentary filmmaker received an offer from Canal 11 to broadcast his documentary for \$1,500 while the same public TV stations offered \$7,000 to a Spanish filmmaker for his documentary (Interview). Juan Francisco Urrusti narrates how Canal 11 was forced to buy *El Pueblo Mexicano que Camina*'s television distribution rights when the public TV station used without his consent some segments of this documentary for a special broadcast (Interview). Canal 11 had previously rejected the documentary.

Recently, as previously mentioned, Canal 11 has been presenting national independent documentaries through the TV show *Abrelatas*. However, documentary filmmakers receive no compensation. Gregorio Rocha, director of *Los Rollos Perdidos de Pancho Villa*, has warned against this practice, which makes independent documentary production unsustainable and hinders the construction of a feasible market for the national documentary (García Bermejo). However, many filmmakers have accepted these conditions since they are faced with limited opportunities to disseminate their works.

### ***México Siglo XX* and distribution**

The development and final launching of *México Siglo XX* was developed and executed by members of the elite classes between 1997 and 1998. Enrique Krauze, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, and Emilio Azcárraga Jean were the decision makers and cultural intermediaries who defined when and how the series would reach the airwaves. Krauze is not only the cultural entrepreneur and historian who produces the series, but a cultural intermediary between his own work and the audience via the Azcárragas and Televisa. Krauze convinced the Azcárragas of *México Siglo XX*'s television distribution based on his prestige, his alignment with Televisa's interests, a long relationship with this conglomerate,

and a historical narrative that had already been publishing, and proven to be unproblematic to Televisa's interests.

The Azcárragas also played a crucial role in supporting the development and distribution of this series. Krauze narrates how Emilio Azcárraga Milmo became upset and disappointed when the PRI lost the Mexico City's government and the majority at congress. Only then, the media baron conceded that it was the time to tell the truth. After watching a pilot for *México Siglo XX*, Azcárraga Milmo exclaimed "Very good, we should show the corruption, we should tell the truth" (qtd. in Jáquez 70-71). In 1998, his heir Emilio Azcárraga Jean approved the broadcast of *México Siglo XX*, and decided what episode should open the series: *Díaz Ordaz y el 68*. Krauze agreed. The series helped these elites appear to distance themselves from the ever-weakening PRI regime.

*México Siglo XX* is a unique case of documentary distribution on commercial television. In a television industry where there is no space for independent producers (only semi-independent producers) and syndication is nonexistent, distribution only occurs through television networks. Clío has latched onto this space thanks to its partnership with Televisa. *México Siglo XX* distribution has also had more opportunities for distribution through video markets in Mexico and in U.S. Hispanic television and video markets. However, through television distribution *México Siglo XX* has become a lasting presence on Mexican television.

During 1998-2006, Clío distributed the documentary series *México Siglo XX* in the following markets: national television, local video markets, and transnational television and video distribution in the United States. Clío has relied on Televisa's media muscle for distribution through all of these channels, except video distribution, since Televisa lost its video distribution subsidiary, Videovisa, at the turn of the new century.

*México Siglo XX* has its first distribution window through Televisa's television networks. Televisa has traditionally broadcast new episodes of *México Siglo XX* during late night schedules on Saturdays and Sundays on its network, Canal 2 while repeats find a place during late night slots on Canal 4, a network with smaller national audience reach. Ratings, ranging from 6 to 10 points in Mexico City, have remained higher than rating performances by documentaries aired on public television, which can reach around 3 points (A. Rodríguez Email; Quintero-Mármol Interview). In 2008, Clío's historical documentary series now under the name *Clío Presenta* found distribution through the upstart Hispanic cable network V-me, a network with several programs with public television fare.

Clío has distributed *México Siglo XX* videos under three different contracts: (1) through special contract alliances with a distributor; (2) by granting distribution rights for specific markets to a distributor in exchange of royalties; (3) and through direct sales upon special requests (A. Rodríguez Email). Adolfo Rodríguez, head of marketing and sales, provided me with several details of Clío's video distribution. There have only been two exclusive video distributors for Clío's documentaries under the first modality. One of them is the now defunct Videovisa, the Televisa subsidiary that once dominated video distribution in the 1990s. Videovisa distributed *México Siglo XX* through all video distribution channels available: video rental stores, department stores, supermarkets, and other retailers. The second distributor was the distribution branch of Reader's Digest based in Mexico, also known as *Selecciones del Reader's Digest*.

The second video distribution route that Clío has followed is a set of three distribution alliances for specific markets in exchange of royalties. In year 2000, Distrimax, one of the major leaders in the Mexican video market since the 1980s, distributed *Mexico Siglo XX* documentaries at retailer stores, departmental stores, supermarkets, and video rental

stores. World Media, a second distributor, focused on the distribution of *Mexico Siglo XX* videos through newspaper stands. According to Adolfo Rodríguez, this channel of distribution garnered the highest sales.

World Media worked with Clío to establish special alliances with specific newspapers. For instance, documentaries focusing on the history of a popular soccer team such as *América*<sup>42</sup>, owned by Televisa, or Guadalajara, would find distribution as a special supplement through a sports newspaper. This was the case of *Club América: El Vuelo de las Águilas* (*America, Soccer Club: The Flight of the Eagles*, Diana Roldán, 2001).

Documentaries focusing on the Mexican Revolution or government administrations, such as the series *Los Sexenios*, would be distributed through a newspaper with a political emphasis.

Newspaper stands sales accounted for 70% of total video sales by 2005 (A. Rodríguez Email). Thanks to those three alliances, Clío no longer faces the risk of losing money for unsold inventory. In 2005, Adolfo Rodríguez indicated that new video releases or editions were solely produced upon demand. However, in 2008, Clío executive Verónica Motta explained that the documentary video house was no longer distributing *México Siglo XX* through video channels. Several copyright licenses to use archival footage had expired and the company was planning to revise some documentaries by inserting newly accessible footage making the older versions obsolete (Motta Email). One can only wonder how *México Siglo XX* can be narrowcast through V-me in the United States while no video distribution of the same episodes is legally possible. However, one of the most relevant aspects of Clío's video distribution is that once again newspaper stands appear as a successful route for documentary videos in the Mexican context during these years.

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<sup>42</sup> In Latin America, the term América implies North America, Central America, and South America, as one continent. Mexicans refer to its northern neighbor as the United States, and rarely as America. The soccer team *América*, owned by Televisa, has as its crest the map of the three Americas, considered as one continent.



The video sales of the most popular documentary episodes from *Mexico Siglo XX* range between the numbers of *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* (40,000 unit sales) and *Franciso Villa: El angel y el fierro* (20,000 unit sales) (Lupone Email). Adolfo Rodríguez mentions that some of the most popular documentaries sold through video are those of historical figures of the Mexican Revolution: Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Porfirio Díaz, Venustiano Carranza, Elías Calles, and Alvaro Obregón (Email). In this list of popular videos, Rodríguez also includes a documentary on Pedro Infante, movie star from the so-called golden age of Mexican cinema; *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* on the Tlatelolco massacre; *Chiapas: la Guerra y la Paz*, on the Zapatista movement; and the two-part documentary, *La Cristiada*, a documentary on the 1920s armed and religious conflict between Catholics and the government. Other successful documentaries are *América* and *Guadalajara*, on two of the most popular and traditional soccer teams; *Vivir la Lucha Libre* on Mexican wrestling; and a two-part history of Mexican rock, *Rock Mexicano I: 1957-1970* and *Rock Mexicano II: 1970-1999*. The heterogeneous mix of these documentary titles reveals that audiences are interested in a wide diversity of topics and themes. Clío's video distribution confirms that *México Siglo XX*'s rating levels are replicated on video sales through these distribution channels.

### **Dispositions to compromise**

In 1996, Krauze would criticize former President Carlos Salinas for his authoritarian style to lead his government, but not for his neo-liberal reforms. Krauze said that “privatization, the free trade agreement, the monetary discipline, etc. . . ., were all coherent policies in the world we live now” (“Neoconservadores” 12). His political leanings and his entrepreneurial vision have rendered an obvious route for Krauze's trajectory. There is no doubt his relations with political and economic powers pose problems and suspicion about his

autonomy and independence as a cultural producer, but Krauze has been congruent with his ideas. Andrew Paxman once wrote that the late Emilio Azcárraga Milmo and Krauze shared “a willingness to compromise” that in part helped them to work together ("History" 73). Krauze’s and Televisa’s dispositions found common ground to adjust their works to the demands of the industry in Editorial Clío and cultural products such as *México Siglo XX*.

### ***México Siglo XX: two eras of historical documentaries***

The particular historical approach and narratives that underpin the structure of *México Siglo XX* made this documentary series ideologically safe for Televisa’s interests and, therefore, for television distribution. This becomes clear when analyzing the two eras of the historical documentary series: *México Siglo XX* (1998-2001) and *México Nuevo Siglo* (2001-present). They show two distinctive and contrasting phases. *México Siglo XX* narrates history from the point of view of those in power. Presidents, movie stars from the so-called golden age of Mexican cinema, and Televisa’s media interests take center stage and history unfolds around them. Some examples of these documentaries are *Miguel Alemán Valdés, el Presidente Empresario* (*Miguel Alemán Valdés, the Businessman President*, 1998), *María Félix, Todas sus Guerras* (*María Félix, All of her Wars*, 1999), and *La Televisión Mexicana, la Imaginación Televisiva* (*Mexican Television, Television’s Imagination*, 1999), which is a sanitized history of this electronic medium in Mexico. In this sense, the core of these documentaries follows Enrique Krauze’s biographical approach to history. The documentaries tend to emphasize a historical process toward progress, modernity, and democracy, a grand historical narrative with national overtones imprinted on Krauze’s work.

Another aspect that has opened the possibility of television distribution for Clío’s historical documentary series is that these historical accounts narrate history mostly from the

point of view of those in power, simplifying a complex series of events, and putting an emphasis on progress, modernity, and democracy with neoliberal overtones. This is a top-down approach, which underscores the interests of the powerful.

Claudio Lomnitz has elaborated a thorough analysis on *Mexico: Biography of Power* in which he identifies several problems in Krauze's historical accounts. In the United States, *Mexico: Biography of Power* (1997) compiles Krauze's *La Presidencia*, *Biografías* and another book *Siglo de Caudillos* (Century of Caudillos, 1994). Throughout his analysis, Lomnitz points out several shortcomings, and only a few attributes in this voluminous work. In this sense, Lomnitz sees in Enrique Krauze's work "the use of history as a gesture in the struggle over who gets to represent Mexico" (1054). Even though Lomnitz concedes that Krauze's *Mexico: Biography of Power* is a "readable book, with some new information," he puts an emphasis in describing this compilation as an opinionated, oversimplified historical account that develops myths and suggests an essential national discourse as a history narrated from the vantage point of the powerful (1061,64).

Mexican neoliberalist trends also contributed to create a scenario conducive to the distribution of *México Siglo XX* based on its historical approach. Krauze's historical narratives work as a revision of history to emphasize the benefits of modernity and progress based on liberal economics, and having democracy as a final destination. In that process, the PRI regime is leaving behind the social ideals of the Mexican revolution, to give way to neoliberal reforms. Once the PRI regime loses the presidency to the PAN, *México Siglo XX* transforms into *México Nuevo Siglo*.

*México Nuevo Siglo* tends toward a more ample exploration of social issues, and even international affairs. Some of the first documentaries discussed the role of women in society: *El Dificil Arte de Ser Mujer* (*The Difficult Role of Being a Woman*, 2001). One documentary

focuses on the Iraq war: *Diario de Baghdad (Diaries of Baghdad, 2004)*. *México Siglo XX* narrates a history of Mexico under the PRI regime. *México Nuevo Siglo* touches on history, but also centers on social issues. This era starts in 2001 once the PRI party has lost the presidency and control of congress. The new phase of the documentary series does more than just provide a broader approach to documentaries. The new phase signifies the reordering of political forces in Mexico. Clío does not need to narrate anymore a history that somehow revalorizes the PRI regime as in the previous series. In a PAN administration, the mediatic discourse of Clío's historical documentary series cannot solely focus on prior presidents from the PRI party. However, Clío continues to engage in productions that serve as promotional TV programs for state governments and neoliberal perspectives. Thus, Clío remains entangled with tensions and contradictions between aspects of plurality and diversity and those that serve the interests of the powerful.

### **Made-for-television historical documentaries**

What history connotes is another factor that helps to explain how the documentary series *México Siglo XX* has found television distribution via Televisa's airways. At first, the term history resonates as an academic discipline, rigorous and objective. However, history is interpretation. Hayden White argues that history is an interpretative framework, no pure fact, no complete story (51). Steve Anderson has explained how White and Dominick La Capra have discussed the interpretative aspect in the constructions of history. Anderson emphasizes that while White points out that the constructions of history "may be filtered, politicized, or influenced by their relations to systems of authority," Dominick La Capra observes that the historical document is not free of "its own historical consciousness" (25). Obviously relying on these authors, Judith Lancioni affirms that history in documentaries is a construction since

archival images are already an interpretation of events, and historians “interpret historical artifacts according to their own temporal and ideological context” (23). These ideas serve to unveil that a particular perspective of history shapes the narratives in *México Siglo XX*. Context, ideologies, hegemonic powers and the filmmakers’ own interests influence these texts. Clío’s team of filmmakers re-articulate Krauze’s historical approach through the interpretation of events, archival images, and contemporary interviews. This interpretative quality often becomes diffuse in documentaries, and especially in those documentaries that articulate a narrative as history. These historical documentaries belong to discourses of sobriety.

According to Bill Nichols, discourses of sobriety, like history, science, economics, or education, suggest that their relationship between the represented world and the real world is direct, and through that idea power is exerted via a dominant knowledge, in this case, a dominant interpretation of history, as an unfiltered set of events (Representing 3-4). Nichols’s ideas of discourse of sobriety help to explain the abundance of documentaries dedicated to sciences and wildlife. They claim authority based on their objectivity. However, documentary filmmakers need to acknowledge that objectivity is always a problematic claim. This is especially true in the historical documentary. Not only do their own interests permeate through their points of views and interpretations, but the interests of those institutions, which produce and distribute these documentaries, also come into play.

Made-for-television historical documentaries tend to present certain characteristics that affect and shape the discourses they tend to mobilize. These attributes pertain to their form as documentaries, but also to the television medium. These particular attributes have made a documentary series like *México Siglo XX* more suitable for commercial television distribution than other documentaries. Gary Edgerton has identified some characteristics in

the historical documentary that affect their narratives and construction of history. Edgerton spots these attributes through his analysis on Ken Burns's historical documentaries. Some of the audiovisual properties and qualities that Edgerton identifies correlate with some characteristics found in Clío's documentaries. Recall that Enrique Krauze has affirmed that Burns's *The Civil War* showed him what could be accomplished with the use of archival material in a historical documentary. Clío's documentaries reflect to a certain degree Burns's rhetorical strategies.

First, televised historical documentaries usually end up reinforcing the dominant narrative of historical events instead of breaking with tradition. Edgerton identifies in the made-for-television historical documentaries a narrative that tends to coalesce viewers into an agreement about already accepted and fixed assumptions of historical events. This translates into a national discourse of history. These attributes appear in Burns's documentaries as well as in *México Siglo XX* documentaries. Even if in dialogue with history based on academic research, the TV historical documentary is mostly popular history. This means "a process of reevaluating the country's legacy and reconfirming it from a new generational perspective" (Edgerton 174). In that sense, these histories are always partial.

Second, made-for-TV histories tend to avoid polemics, especially when on television, either private or public, where government or corporate funding intends to reach a large audience in unison, with the least objectionable program. Edgerton stresses that the TV historical documentary is "... not intended chiefly to debate issues, challenge the conventional wisdom and create new knowledge and perspectives," but "to connect ... in the present with a shared sense of their common past" (186). The historical accounts in *México Siglo XX* documentaries have not altered or polemicized general assumptions of Mexican history. Instead, *México Siglo XX* has complemented the narrative with closure. Closure

revolves around the idea of a nation that has entered an era of true democracy after numerous hurdles.

In part, this unifying narrative originates from the goals, interests, and ideological positions of the producers. According to Edgerton, Ken Burns combines in his documentaries his own liberal pluralist perspective and other widespread assumptions on the liberal pluralist character of the United States (183-84). This liberal pluralist perspective clinches on national discourses. In a similar way, the historical documentaries in *México Siglo XX* move to the front historical assumptions, and a nationalist tone, in combination to a neoliberal angle (part of the producers' interests), which remains present, and somehow subtle.

Clío's historical documentary series, especially those in the first era, also rely on the notion of the hero representing the nation. These documentaries lean toward an overarching narrative of a national history whereby the Mexican nation reaches democracy through the lives of its personalities, especially the presidents of this country. Historical documentaries, like *México Siglo XX*, often focus on personalities to narrate history only in relation to personal struggles while neglecting the complexity of historical events (Toplin 1111).

Despite references of corruption and authoritarianism, by the end of each episode the historical series conveys the idea that this was a process that eventually, through progress, modernity, and industrialization led to democracy. This structure is found especially in those documentaries covering presidential administrations. Three examples are *Ávila Camacho: la Unidad Nacional* (*Avila Camacho: the National Unity*, 1998); *Ernesto Zedillo: la Construcción de la Democracia* (*Ernesto Zedillo: the Construction of Democracy*, 2000); and *Díaz Ordaz y el 68*. These events are presented as if the historical process of Mexico follows a teleological destiny.

*Díaz Ordaz y el 68* could have been one of the most controversial segments in Clío's

documentary series. However, the producers of this documentary avoided speculation on the thorniest issues. These theories include the responsibilities in those events of the Mexican army and Luis Echeverría, secretary of State at the time, and later president (1970-1976). *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* only mentions Echeverría to emphasize that Díaz Ordaz assumed all the responsibility of these tragic events. However, the documentary does not explore the role that Echeverría must have played in these incidents as secretary of State. During an interview before this documentary's broadcast, Krauze summarizes how the documentary dealt with these topics. First, he said: "This is not a special news report type of work . . .;" and he added: "These was a conflict between a libertarian youth and authoritarian president . . . the Army only followed orders" (qtd. in Jáquez 70-71).

Another problematic point was the documentary's reference to the massacre's death toll. Appropriately, *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* mentions that the number of dead is unknown, and figures vary from sources such as the press, government, and independent writers, like Elena Poniatowska. However, these sources only mention dead counts below 70. *Díaz Ordaz y el 68* fails to acknowledge other sources that have mentioned that the massacre had a toll between 200 up to 800 bodies (Paz 94; Braun 533). Here, the notion of an objective historical narrative comes into question.

The producers behind Clío's historical series claim these documentaries follow the rigor of history, as a discipline which is part of discourses of sobriety. According to this argument, producers, consultants, filmmakers, and screenwriters have to abide by the rules that tend toward objectivity and neutrality. Luis Lupone, Clío's head of production and director of *Díaz Ordaz y el 68*, explains that Clío's documentaries follow a historical approach under Krauze's guidance as a historian (Interview). For Luis Lupone, history cannot take a political stance. Clío's producers refer to their efforts to collect data, information, and



often, counterpose those arguments. Yet, Lupone is aware of the limitations of visual representations of a historical event. Addressing the possibility of leaving out of these historical narratives certain points of view, Lupone concedes that they are constrained by the 40-minute limit of an hour program. However, those practices in television production only adds to other constraints in the made-for-television documentary. Like Ken Burns said of his historical documentaries, “we’re not here to debate as much as we are here to cohere” (qtd. in Edgerton 181-82). The same can be said of Clío’s televised historical documentary series. Thus, intentions to create a debate and a discussion become minimized by practices that pull toward a unifying national historical narrative in agreement with the general assumptions of history in the mainstream.

The tensions between a plural discourse of history and the standardization of one in *México Siglo XX* and *México Nuevo Siglo* reveal several problems of diversity and plurality in terms of source or producers, and content constrained by the demands of television practices. While Clío’s historical documentary series have attempted to present diverse points of view, more than once the series appears to serve the interests of a political and economic class. For instance, Clío produced two highly critical documentaries on Carlos Salinas de Gortari. These two documentaries are *Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Asuntos de Familia* (*Carlos Salinas, Family Affairs*, 1999) and *Carlos Salinas, el Hombre que Quiso Ser Rey* (*The Man who Wanted to Be King*, 1999). Both documentaries centered on Salinas’s personal ambitions rather than on his economic policies. Clío produced these documentaries under Ernesto Zedillo administration. At the time, Zedillo and Salinas had become political enemies. They had held each other responsible for the 1994 economic crisis in Mexico. In contrast to those documentaries on Salinas, *México Siglo XX* produced a documentary on Ernesto Zedillo in 2000. The title highlights the sheer difference of treatment: *Ernesto Zedillo: the Construction*

*of Democracy*. A recent example is the documentary *Para Modernizar la Industria Petrolera* (*Modernizing the Mexican Oil Industry*, 2008), with a strong argument in favor of a privatizing energy reform that congress along with opinion leaders, academics, and politicians were debating at the time. The PAN administration led by Felipe Calderón was the championing this reform against a strong opposition to the privatization of the Mexican oil from political parties and a large sector of society. Thus, in a large body of documentaries, here and there, Enrique Krauze and Clío wield the power of the historical documentary to advance their own political agenda and those of their allies.

Television production and distribution practices exemplify the limits of history in made-for-TV historical documentaries. The mass production of historical documentaries for television tends to affect the quality of the final product. In his analysis on The History Channel and its documentary production, Brian Taves has highlighted problems such as the constant demand for new television programming; constraints of production values and research due to scarcities of financial resources and time; an overuse of archival material; and a tendency to avoid controversies to achieve mass appeal in local and international markets (270-71,76).

Those behind *México Siglo XX* have referred directly or indirectly to these constraints. Lupone concedes that Clío's producers have to condense six years, or the life of a presidential figure, in forty minutes. In addition to the 40-minute format, *México Siglo XX* executive producer Hank Heifetz points out that Clío's producers have to design each historical documentary in a seven-chapter structure to intersperse TV commercials (qtd. in Castro "Disputa" 70-71). Each episode requires its own specific narrative, with dramatic plot points, and a conclusion. Even Krauze has pointed out that they are forced to conform to a "dictatorial weekly schedule" (qtd. in Lazcano "Aparecerá" 14). These television demands

translate into the mechanization of the historical documentary, a fast-pace production of history in a documentary format.

### **On the airways**

Televisa and Krauze have produced historical documentaries for a mass audience as both an economic and cultural enterprise. In that process, Krauze has been at risk within the struggles of the intellectual field as he simplifies for the masses the complexity of a historical narrative. What Krauze has at stake is his own independent and autonomous position from political and economic demands of the parent company that screens and distribute his documentaries. By association, his publishing and video production company Clío, and the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX* also run those risks.

Krauze intends through his cultural project to familiarize the mass audiences with the unfamiliar details of Mexican history as a form of “cultural proselytism, that is, winning a market by widening their audience” (Bourdieu Distinction 229). In this process, which suggests the democratization of culture, there are mixed results. Bourdieu notices these ambiguities as he contrasts the interests of those institutions putting their cultural works in the market and the interests of an audience. Bourdieu indicates that this ambivalence can occur in an art museum as well as in other more massive cultural forms of distribution. In reference to this, Bourdieu points out that, “An analysis of the debates which occurred when cheap paperbacks came onto the market – as promise of popularity for the author, a threat of vulgarization for the reader – would reveal the same ambivalence” (Distinction 230). What Bourdieu implies is the oversimplification of a cultural work as it becomes mass produced in exchange for economic or political gains. That is the case with Enrique Krauze’s *México Siglo XX* documentary series. Televisa executives agree to broadcast *México Siglo XX* series

to a mass audience since these documentaries rearticulate known assumptions of recent Mexican history while subtly framing them with the new neoliberal discourse of modernity, progress, and industrialization. These documentaries do not threaten the status quo, but support it. While audiences get to see in these documentaries a narrative of historical events never seen before on television, they will not find in these programs the complex interplay of forces affecting those events. That complex narrative may end up revealing the collusion of some media powers in the perpetuation of many social injustices in Mexico.

*México Siglo XX* is broadcast on a channel controlled by Televisa during the vacillating moment of media openness in the 1990s. Krauze promoted *México Siglo XX* as a documentary series aiming to reach an audience interested in the transformations toward a democratic state, to reflect about society, to spark debates and discussions (Garay "Mostrarán" 1; Bertrán and Garay 13). However, this historical documentary series shows ambiguities and contradictions. The television distribution of *México Siglo XX* represents the struggles between trends of change (independent media from government influence) and trends of continuity (concentration of media ownership, alliances between hegemonic powers). On the one hand, these documentaries intend to be part of processes toward the decentralization of television production and distribution. On the other, they also represent tendencies toward the resistance of those democratic transformations. *México Siglo XX* evokes the notion of history as a discourse of sobriety, firmly objective. Yet, *México Siglo XX* simplifies for the masses a complex historical narrative, replacing objectivity with the overtones of a national discourse of a country toward modernity and democracy.

Through his historical documentary productions, the renowned historian Enrique Krauze, part of Mexican *intelligentsia* and a cultural entrepreneur, bestows Televisa with an aura of prestige. Televisa has broadcast this series as one of several strategies to retain a

dominant position in the television industry. During a press conference in 1998, Televisa executive Alberto Ciurana used *México Siglo XX* as evidence that the powerful media corporation had an interest in broadcasting cultural and educative programming (Garay "Compartirá" 15). Yet, these historical accounts are speaking from a position of power, and rearticulating history according to the dominant discourse. Through these documentaries, Krauze communicates his vision of contemporary Mexican history to a mass audience. A central tenet of the series' ideology is that through the lives of those in power, Mexico went into a path of democracy moving from the ideals of the revolution to neoliberal policies. Of course, Clío is also making a business out of history.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions

In *Capitalism and Communication*, Nicholas Garnham argues that “It is access to distribution which is the key to cultural plurality” (*Capitalism* 90). In this dissertation, I have analyzed three case studies in which Mexican documentaries have reached film, video, or television distribution contributing to diversifying the supply of audiovisual content in these fields. Through this study, I have identified the politics involved in the distribution of Mexican documentaries during the 1988-2006 period. While there are good and bad movies among fiction and nonfiction works, governmental and commercial interests constrain documentary distribution. By highlighting these politics as the barriers obstructing the distribution of national documentaries, this research reveals there is nothing inherent in the documentary genre that detracts the commercial distribution of these films. Instead, political interests, and industrial practices favor the distribution of films, videos, and television programs produced by large corporations working in the context of industries operate under oligopolistic conditions. Here, I want to proceed by responding to a series of questions, which go from the general to the specific.

Is the distribution of Mexican documentaries limited? In this study, I have shown that the distribution of Mexican documentaries is limited when compared to the distribution of other audiovisual products in terms of three dimensions: source of productions and content, especially in terms of genres and points of view. Large national and transnational corporations chiefly distribute films, videos, and television programs in which they have economic, and sometimes, political interests. Those are the dominant films in the market. Documentaries, as a genre, circulate through distribution channels in exceptional cases.

National documentaries continue to struggle to find distribution. In terms of points of view, most audiovisual products present mainstream perspectives and values.

What factors are constraining the distribution of Mexican documentaries? Three elements have to be taken into consideration before answering this question. First, each audiovisual industry operates under different conditions. Secondly, some common factors affect distribution issues in the three audiovisual industries under study, but they could influence these fields in particular ways. These factors operate at a macro level. Finally, there are specific political and industrial practices that stifle documentary distribution in more specific terms at a micro level. These industries share some of these micro level factors.

At a macro level, two factors limit the distribution of Mexican documentaries. To begin with, neoliberal economic policies favor large corporations, which end up developing industries with a high degree of ownership concentration. These corporations have grown, expanding the markets. That expansion has allowed a limited access of few independent cultural producers and their products. While the distribution of these products is minimal, it does help to legitimate the preservation of a neoliberal system by showing and overemphasizing the minor participation of independent producers in the market as indicative of the benefits in this economic system. Second, the Mexican State has often intervened eliminating funding initiatives to support cultural production. In this way, recent government administrations have intended to preserve a neoliberal economic system, perceived as a system that would eventually improve the overall well being of the population.

Before discussing factors at the micro level, what are the general characteristics in which each audiovisual field functions in relation to documentary distribution? In the film industry, the economic interests of large national and transnational corporations in production and distribution are far-reaching, often co-opting independent producers. The distribution of

*Del Olvido al no Me Acuerdo* via Nuvisión-Videocine illustrates this point. The video industry resembles this situation, but the field allows for viable alternatives for video production and distribution. Canal 6 de Julio attests this fact. In this sense, theatrical distribution imposes higher economic barriers to newcomers. In Mexico, the largest movie theatre chains are unwilling to adopt video projection to screen movies (Ugalde Interview). Thus, video technology is not the final step for a filmmaker who seeks theatrical distribution. A large investment has to be made before a video documentary gets a theatrical release. This is not the case in the video field. Videomakers do not expect to see their documentaries on the big screen.

Private television networks and public television stations also need to have an economic stake in national documentaries before they reach the airwaves. Since the industry has functioned in monopolistic and oligopolistic structures with no restrictions for in-house production, there is no distribution market for independent television programming in Mexico. The historical documentary series *México Siglo XX* is a result of these conditions. This series demonstrates that national documentaries can reach a broad distribution. However, they need to avoid presenting content that threatens political and economic powers. Only then, large corporations will support their distribution.

Since 2003, the public TV station, Canal 11, has begun to broadcast independent Mexican documentary production through one television show, *Can-opener*, but the station will not pay for distribution rights. Canal 11 considers that the mere broadcast of documentaries constitutes support for national independent documentary production (Quintero-Mármol Interview). This public station neglects to acknowledge the fact that no economic incentive goes to the producers. In contrast, public TV stations in Mexico, like Canal 11, do acquire the rights to broadcast foreign documentaries. For them, these



productions bring prestige to their stations. They also serve as an easy solution to justify the bureaucratic positions held by these television managers.

At the micro level, Hollywood distributors follow a series of strategies to dominate film distribution. From block-booking, euphemistically called in Spanish *contrato de audiencia* (audience contract), to black listing movie theatres, from saturating screens through front-loading tactics (releasing a film with hundreds of prints) to lavishing marketing campaigns, Hollywood distributors lead film distribution in Mexico. Obviously, these strategies are not only aimed toward documentaries. However, distributors do engage in an informal practice, a negative discourse against documentary film, even more for national production.

Through a series of statements, these distributors elaborate an argument that seeks to delegitimize the commercial viability of documentaries. These statements describe documentaries as tedious and lacking broad appeal based on a series of generalizations, misconceptions, and prejudices against the genre. This discourse intends to eliminate them from competition by obscuring the dynamics of film distribution and the state of screen saturation in the theatrical market.

The video market does not face the limits found in theatrical distribution: 52 play dates or *opening weekends* and less than 4,000 screens are available for 300 films (or less) per year<sup>43</sup>. However, Blockbuster dominates the video rental business favoring Hollywood products. Canal 6 de Julio's case study shows how the Mexican government has played an ambivalent role in the collective's video distribution. At one point, Canal 6 de Julio filmmakers faced in Mexican government its greatest obstacle to reach commercial distribution. The federal film agency RTC acted as a censorship board neglecting to approve

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<sup>43</sup> Source: IMCINE.

Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries for distribution. Thus, Canal 6 de Julio's video distribution was stymied by red tape. However, few years later, the Education Department through its cultural agency, CONACULTA, changed the business profile of the state-run bookstore chain, Educal. Educal along with other national bookstore chains have become a vital distribution circuit for Canal 6 de Julio's videos. Other mainstream video distributors also articulate the same discourse against documentaries elaborated by film distributors.

In the television industry, concentration practices have eliminated or co-opted independent producers. National documentaries have struggled to obtain commercial agreements for entrée into private or public television airwaves. Independent documentary filmmakers have to participate in co-production with television organizations in order to broadcast their works. What the distribution of the historical documentary series *México Siglo XX* has demonstrated is that documentaries do not carry an intrinsic attribute that bars their commercial distribution. Television corporations are willing to distribute national documentaries as long as they do not present an ideological stance that contradicts mainstream values and the status quo. This explains the televised presence of documentaries covering historical, anthropological, scientific, or wildlife topics.

Against this panorama, national documentary filmmakers have followed three important strategies. First, these documentary filmmakers have taken distribution in their own hands. In their own terms, they have replicated at scale a vertical integration industrial strategy, connecting their production and distribution efforts. This research has shown that national filmmakers have to follow their documentaries through their life cycle to make sure distribution and exhibition agreements are fulfilled. By becoming distributors of their own works, they expand the chances of making their production practices sustainable through the potential profits in distribution.

A second strategy is the adoption of new distribution circuits. This is more prominent in Canal 6 de Julio's and Clío's case studies. Surprisingly, in Mexico newspaper stands have become an effective way to distribute videos. The case studies of Canal 6 and Clío proved that newspaper stands, as a distribution channel, the most effective and profitable venue for the distribution of their documentaries. In addition, Canal 6 de Julio has started to explore the benefits of video streaming. However, economic disparities in Mexico magnify the digital divide in Internet usage. Another important aspect is that each case study showed, in its particular circumstance, the advantages and disadvantages in the production of documentaries with or without state funding. In film productions, state support is still relevant, but only as a co-producer. In video documentary production, the mode of production that Canal 6 de Julio implements is at odds with state support or any other type of funding. To remain independent, they only rely on their video sales. Clío's case study shows how claims of "autonomy" are contradictory within the political economy of mainstream television.

Finally, the construction of prestige and the role of cultural intermediaries have also been relevant in the promotion of the documentaries in the present analysis. Juan Carlos Rulfo and La Media Luna's case study is the clearest example. Canal 6 de Julio has often released their documentaries through a public event in which opinion leaders introduce the video collective's newest documentary. To differentiate its television programming from its new competitor, Televisa also relied on the accumulated and institutionalized prestige of Enrique Krauze and his documentary series *México Siglo XX*.

Guadalupe Ferrer, head of IMCINE's Film and Cultural Film Promotion in 2006, has underscored the relevance of national documentaries. "The [documentary] genre is important because it deals with the memory of a nation, mirroring identities and traditions" (qtd. in Huerta "Gana"). The analysis of these case studies has shown limitations and shortcomings

in the distribution of Mexican documentaries. Often, when these films, videos, and TV series find distribution, the conditions of their circulation remain precarious. The politics that affect documentary distribution in Mexico tend to define those conditions in which filmmakers get to distribute their documentary films through commercial circuits.

The aforementioned case studies show that the film and television industries present more distribution barriers than the video field due to a high level of ownership concentration and high investments in production and distribution. One example demonstrates how political and economic factors can affect the theatrical distribution of a film. In 2007, Videocine and Warner Bros dropped Luis Mandoki's documentary *Fraude: México 2006* (*Fraud: Mexico 2006*, 2006) from theatrical distribution. This film argues that the 2006 presidential elections were fraudulent. The elections favored Felipe Calderón, candidate from the right-wing party PAN over Andrés López Obrador, candidate from the left-wing party PRD. The film also includes segments with Televisa executives, including CEO Emilio Azcárraga Jean. In a press conference, Warner Bros and Videocine executives explained that after a business analysis they had reached the conclusion that this documentary had no commercial appeal. Warner Bros executive Juan Borbolla explained, "Sadly in Mexico, documentaries have not taken off yet, they do not do well at the box office" (qtd. in Carreño 5). However, with support from citizens, Mandoki found the economic resources to distribute this film through movie theatres (qtd. in Garavito 2). In contrast to his theatrical distribution experience, Mandoki found no problems video distribution. This filmmaker distributed three video documentaries covering López Obrador's presidential campaign through newspaper stands.

In *Convergence Culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins introduces Ithiel de Sola Pool as the prophet of media convergence (10). Pool described film and television as centralized media while the Internet is characteristically decentralized. Pool argues that:

Freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available, as are printing presses or microcomputers. Central control is more likely when the means of communication are concentrated, monopolized, and scarce, as great networks. (qtd. in Jenkins 11)

Through this assertion, Pool highlights the concentration of powers and the controls in the film and television industries that bar the entrance of newcomers while the Internet, a media more ad hoc to video productions, has less entry barriers.

Canal 6 de Julio is the only production organization under analysis that has embraced these new technologies. However, Canal 6 de Julio has only distributed one documentary using these new delivery methods. The documentary *Romper el Cerco* was available online, free of charge, due to the importance of its content. The video documentary shows police repression against the population of a small town at the outskirts of Mexico City. The video collective does sell documentaries via its website, but it has not continued to use Internet downloading technologies to distribute other documentaries. Even if the collective choose this route in the future, Canal 6 de Julio will probably continue to charge its constituency a fee to purchase its documentary production since this is its only way to finance the operation. Internet distributive technologies could be an alternative to distribute documentaries in Mexico. However, the problem is that in 2006 less than 20 percent of the Mexican population had access to Internet<sup>44</sup>.

Néstor García Canclini has referred to Latin American countries as nations with a hybrid culture where “traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived” (Hybrid 1). This circumstance explains a hybrid Mexican audiovisual field where

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<sup>44</sup> Source: Asociación Mexicana de Internet. <http://ampici.org.mx/>. 20 May 2008

documentaries get produced and circulate in a more artisan and semi-industrialized manner against modern filmmaking practices. Canal 6 de Julio has already explored Internet technologies, but the video collective still depends on bookstore chains and documentary screenings at university auditorium and bookstores. The overlapping of modernity and traditions also explains why the traveling documentary festival *Ambulante* has grabbed some attention from audiences by circulating through the centralized theatrical circuits of the only major Mexican exhibitor, *Cinépolis*.

The *Ambulante* initiative is an important project in the tradition of the itinerant documentary filmmakers of the 1910s. *Ambulante* is a touring film festival intended to promote documentary films in Mexico. This festival travels through more than a dozen cities in Mexico presenting a documentary series that includes national and international documentaries. Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal, *Y Tu Mamá También* movie stars, are behind this initiative through their company Canana Films. According to *Ambulante*'s director, Elena Fortes, after watching the Mexican documentary *Trópico de Cáncer* (*Tropic of Cancer*, 2005) by Eugenio Polgovsky, the young actors were wondering why documentaries are rarely shown on movie theatres (Interview). Then, Luna and García Bernal came up with the idea of *Ambulante*. The Morelia Film Festival, which has an emphasis on documentaries, and *Cinépolis* executives joined the project. Fortes also notes that Canana Films is considering acquiring the distribution rights of some of the documentaries that participate in the tour, therefore, going from documentary promoter to documentary distributor. Finally, she states that the notion that audiences are not interested in documentary films is wrong. While she did not provide information on attendance records, Fortes asserts that attendance was good enough to convince *Cinépolis* executives to continue with this project in 2007 (Interview).

This project is another step to familiarize audiences with the documentary. Twelve out of nineteen documentaries were Mexican productions in the 2006 edition of *Ambulante*. This is still a promotional effort, inserted in commercial circuits, but within limiting parameters: fifteen cities, and one documentary per day. Many documentaries in *Ambulante* touched upon social and popular issues. For instance, *Trópico de Cancer* takes place in a rural area where families hunt wild animals for survival, then selling them at the edge of the nearest highway. This is one of the reasons the distribution of documentaries is vital for any society: to catalyze discussions on social problems that relate to an audience.

The documentaries under analysis have contributed to a certain degree to the discussions and dialogues taking place in the public sphere. Canal 6 de Julio's social and political documentaries are the one that more clearly fulfill this function. However, La Media Luna's documentaries have also provided a new perspective on the representation of citizens that are often marginalized in more than one sense. Even Clío's *México Siglo XX* has sparked discussions in political magazines as the historical documentary series has presented programs that advocate for the privatization of the oil industry. Through the many spaces of what constitute the public sphere, these documentaries and a few others that have been able to enter commercial distribution. Thus, they are stimulating the debates and discussions in social, political, and cultural arenas in Mexico.

These documentaries have also shown that the viewing experience of documentaries does not require a specific cultural capital to enjoy them, understand them, or appreciate them. With a precarious distribution and minor or no promotional campaigns, La Media Luna's and Canal 6 de Julio's documentaries have reached tens of thousand of viewers. With Televisa's support, Clío's *México Siglo XX* reached ratings comparable to some popular telenovelas. Long ago, Lindsay Anderson said that,

“Documentary should not be – it certainly need not be – synonymous with dullness. It should be one of the most exciting and stimulating of contemporary form.” (70)

Documentaries are a large corpus of works with their own subgenres, styles, and formats. Some of them are exciting and stimulating while others are dull. The same can be said about fiction films. However, there is a misconception on the documentary genre, which obscures the new panorama emerging in the documentary field of production. Some of these recent documentaries still rely on old strategies such as voice over narrations and a long takes, but they combine those resources with new ones, also adding incisive arguments, and forceful and resounding evidence. Through those strategies, they are able to raise their case, invite an audience to reflect, present a piece of life or culture previously ignored, or reveal a point of view not heard before on a specific issue.

There is no need to learn a way of watching a documentary film. Viewers do not need a special taste, codes that belong to the *connoisseur* who have learned the strategies to read, decipher, and appreciate a film through extensive education. This is what Bourdieu referred to as the cultural capital, a partial objectification of taste to appreciate literary works and other forms of art (Distinction 2).

Documentaries resort to multiple strategies to engage their audiences and present their cases in a clear way. However, it is pertinent to say there is a need to familiarize the public at large with documentaries circulating through film festivals and universities as suggested by film officials like Victor Ugalde and Carlos Taibo. However, it is not a matter of learning how to read a documentary but a matter of debunking misconceptions about this genre.



In this stratagem, there is a return to the notion of the cultural intermediary: the one that introduces a cultural work to an audience. As Bourdieu pointed out, cultural intermediaries participate in the production of meaning and value to the art works (The Field 37). This is how the cultural field of production works and those strategies, the recognition bestowed by film awards, the praise of critics, the academic essay, are all manifestations of the field. At times, these intermediaries seek to create recognition through misrecognition by creating value on subjective grounds (The Field 81). Documentaries still need to rely in these strategies to compete in the audiovisual fields. The genre carries a long history of negative connotations that need to be reverted. Against the misrecognitions created by marketing campaigns promoting Hollywood films in slogans that praise movies as *best film of the year* or *must-see movie*, those social agents promoting documentaries need to engage in a sort of public relations activity to connect documentaries and audiences.

With such tough competition, some documentary filmmakers have questioned the notion that there is a peak in documentary distribution and a reemergence of Mexican documentaries in the audiovisual fields. Nicolás Echevarría describes the few Mexican documentaries that have reached distribution during the 2000s as exceptional cases. Echevarría deems them as isolated efforts, “esfuerzos aislados,” from the most committed documentary filmmakers (qtd. in Franco 1). Mexican documentaries had forayed into movie theatres, but only a few film distributors have shown interest in distributing these works. Documentary filmmakers like Antonio Isordia and Marcela Arteaga have also pointed out the obstacles in distribution and exhibition. Isordia notes that it is so difficult to find distribution that even a limited release seems as an accomplishment (qtd. in Huerta "Gana"). Marcela Arteaga warns about being too optimistic based on a few documentary releases. Arteaga underscores that it is important to pay attention to the limited distribution conditions in which

these documentaries arrive to movie theatres (ibid). Arteaga addresses the fact that distribution is not only sending a film to a movie theatre, in this case, a documentary, but also about distribution agreements, marketing, promotional budgets, a large or limited release, number of prints, and even what kind of theatre and what schedules the documentary film is receiving in the distribution deal. Moreover, in an interview with Carlos Mendoza, the Spanish documentary filmmaker José Sánchez-Montes asserts that there is no documentary boom in Europe, but that is the way in which the press is selling the presence of a few documentaries in movie theatres (qtd. in Mendoza "Limosnero" 45).

Talking about the Mexican film industry in 2003, film critic Marién Estrada wrote that national production, distribution, and exhibition of Mexican cinema went from bureaucratic protectionism to neoliberal abandonment (Estrada). As Estrada suggests, the dynamics of the industry have changed, but the Mexican film industry continues to struggle to survive. Neoliberal trends have reduced the role of the state in the decision-making processes to decide what films, video, and programs get produced and receive distribution and exhibition. While it is positive that the State has reduced its participation in these processes, the State has failed to establish adequate mechanisms whereby independent production, distribution, and exhibition can thrive against the uneven competition these producers confront in large national and transnational corporations. For most part, the State has left to the market, that is, media corporations, to decide what gets produced, distributed, and screened to an audience. However, in this context, the State has participated, but not in favor of national production and distribution, but to make sure that international free trade agreements remain in place.

In Mexico, there is a need to develop cultural policies and legislation to eliminate the hurdles that stifle the distribution of Mexican documentaries, independently produced,

through movie theatres, video outlets, and television, especially public television. In Latin America, Mexico is one of the countries with less state support for film production and distribution, especially if compared against Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela. Cultural policies would compensate for the flaws that a free market economy does not solve such as lack of diversity in terms of source of production, genres, and points of view in audiovisual works. Outlets for the free expression of national producers making documentaries are being lost as the public sphere shrinks under neoliberalism.

Even though some Mexican documentaries are reaching commercial distribution in Mexico, the many limitations and shortcomings outweigh the progress made by a few documentary filmmakers. Here I find pertinent to adapt to the Mexican context what B. Ruby Rich has said about the U.S. documentary:

For every eager-to-please, eager-to-shock [Mexican or] U.S. documentary celebrated in the press, however, there is a corresponding under-the-radar documentary, shot digitally, distributed through festivals or downloads, urgently delivering information that the mainstream media can no longer carry. (110)

When the free market mechanisms bog down the free distribution of an important body of works such as the contemporary Mexican documentary, other alternatives need to be followed. If the State is not up to the task, then, the documentary filmmakers themselves must come together to seek a solution finding or establishing alternative distribution channels.

### **Future research**

The scarce literature on Mexican documentaries is indicative of the different routes future research can take besides an analysis on documentary distribution through the lenses of

political economy and Bourdieu's field theory. A thorough historical account of many phases of the development of Mexican documentaries is still pending. In particular, a fruitful one can focus on the documentary trends developed during the 1960s and 1970s. Another much needed research is one that can map out the recent approaches in Mexican documentary filmmaking practices. This study will show the high degree of diversity in the documentary form in Mexico. In addition, there is a need to study in more detail individual documentary filmmakers and individual works. Many prominent documentary filmmakers and their documentaries remain ignored by the current documentary literature, even in the multi-volumen encyclopedic anthologies. Future studies should also pay attention to tensions between institutional programs that promote indigenous documentary practices and the actual interests of these communities in engaging in this kind of cultural production.

Future research should also examine the reception of documentaries by audiences. Audience studies are crucial to understand how different documentary films connect or fail to do so with viewers. Moreover, audience research also presents an opportunity to assess the degree of familiarity viewers have with the documentary form. The findings of these studies should identify up to what degree audiences have a misconception of the documentary form.

There are still opportunities for studies on documentary distribution. Future studies could center more in detail on new media technologies as alternative distribution channels. While YouTube could be the site of one of these studies, another could be an exploration of the feasibility of establishing web sites that offer documentaries through Internet downloads. This type of research could identify how viable are these alternatives for documentary distribution in Mexico.

The present study provides an analysis on an area of film and media studies rarely explored, Mexican documentaries and distribution issues. This research serves as a

contribution to documentary studies, and Mexican cinema. It is an attempt to expand the intermittent and infrequent discussions on this corpus of films. Hopefully in the future, these studies will take more prominence as these documentaries become more widely distributed.

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