Postmodernism and Feminism in Mexican Theatre: *Aura y las once mil vírgenes* by Carmen Boullosa

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Mexican author Carmen Boullosa (Mexico City, 1954) is one of the most recognized and prolific writers of her generation (Ortega 167; Domínguez PI[1]). Best known in the U.S. and Europe for her critically acclaimed novels (*Mejor desaparece, Antes, Son vacas, somos puercos, El médico de los piratas, La Milagrosa*), Boullosa's contributions to the Mexican stage during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s are seen as part of the creative excellence and experimentation that keep Mexican theatre one of the most important in Latin America. The artistic production of this poet, novelist, playwright, actress, and theatre-bar owner has been described by Mexican critics as both feminist and postmodern (de Luna; Patán), terms often used in Mexico without providing a definition or critical application. In this essay, I will show how Boullosa's work actively participates in both debates and engages in an ongoing reformulation of the very categories and critical tools with which we approach the texts and their context—that is, contemporary Mexican society in transition. The essay begins with a brief discussion of postmodernism and feminisms. In order to place the study in context, an outline of issues involving the "crisis" of the transition in Mexican society follows. Finally, an analysis of Boullosa's play, *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, shows how the author's dramatic technique reveals a feminist attitude and a postmodern vision of Mexico as it faces the twenty-first century.

Postmodernism is characterized as a phenomena in which there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices, and discourse formations, and a foregrounding of questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate. There is an aversion to any project that seeks universal human emancipation through the mobilization of the powers of science, technology, and reason (Harvey 44-45). Postmodern culture marks an era of "hyper-representation" in which reality itself begins to be experienced as a network of representations. The paradigm for the arts is mass media and advertising. Everything is indefinitely reproducible and represented as a

commodity. Categories such as "the thing itself," the "authentic" and the "real," formerly considered the objects of representation, now become themselves endlessly reduplicated and distributed (Mitchell 16-17). In the postmodern age, "nature" is always self-evident as a "fabrication," always the "effect" of certain human interests and social purposes.

Feminism, as Boullosa (and this essay) employs the term, signals movements that acknowledge and act to change the interpersonal, societal, and institutional relations which are based on sexism as a system of domination. These relations result in the suppression and repression of individual social subjects—*both* male and female. When speaking of Mexico, the term "feminisms" is more accurate. It encompasses the economic, class, religious, regional, and ethnic differences among and between groups of women which are then reflected in the variety of methods of organization and strategies for change that are at times conflictive and contradictory.[2] Nonetheless, women in Mexico are recognizing the need to underscore the common denominator that permits the possibility of a category "women": the repression that all females experience in a particular way due to their shared identity as women in Mexico's very rigid, patriarchal society (Franco xi-xxiv; Boullosa PI). Boullosa shares with other Latin American writers a broad concept of feminist activity and literature. Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro explains:

> As a rule, a work is considered to touch on the theme of feminism when its leading characters are women and are repressed or in rebellion. As far as I am concerned, a work is feminist insofar as it attempts to explain the mechanics of cruelty, oppression, and violence through a story that is developed in a world in which men and women exist. (qtd. in Castillo 30)

Postmodernism and feminism share in challenging the notion of "representation" that emphasizes systems of signification which, operating within certain codes and conventions, are socially constructed and historically conditioned. There has been hesitation, however, on the part of many feminists to use postmodernism as a critical tool because of its complicity with the systems it re-presents (a supposedly ideologically "free" representation), a characteristic that prevents postmodernism's critical program from translating into a strategy for change. Feminists seek not only to redefine as social constructs universal modernist and humanistic "truths" (History, Religion, Progress), but also to alter the systems based on them and upon which our social institutions have been constructed.

Boullosa's work manifests a postmodernist vision and a feminist attitude. She challenges universalist projects that, in the name of individual freedom and physical and spiritual well-being, require "rational" ordering of space and time. She exposes the masked masculinity of the humanistic vision of "Man." Boullosa sees this image, always defined in terms of the masculine and seen as *the* source of social power, as missing something: the "feminine" and feminine sensibility. Boullosa challenges the very categories of gender which she points to as forming part of a strategy for social control in Mexico. In *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, as in her other writing, this author participates in a feminist project to deconstruct capitalistic, patriarchal representations of female desire and body, and explores the consequences of the mechanisms of power inherent in linguistic, sociopolitical, and cultural systems. Boullosa does this without falling prey to "panfletarismo" (in the style of political propaganda) or to a formula of "feminine" writing that in Mexico, suggests Mexican critic Margo Glantz, referring to the recent "boom" in women's writing, "adjusts to the parameters of buying-selling, like a fashionable magical realism, designed for and by the market" (32).

Boullosa's feminism and postmodernism manifest themselves in both the form and content of her work. Often fragmented and always self-reflective, her style brings into question the established genres and transgresses rules about "good" literature; she plays with the relationship between author, text, and reader/spectator, as well as with the canon itself. She always questions the category of "truth," in terms of her art and of the world in which it is generated, a world she calls "Mexican society in crisis" (PI). Boullosa's use of the term "crisis" indicates the sense of urgency underlying her critique of Mexican reality, and falls within the definition put forth by Diana Taylor in *Theatre of Crisis* when she refers to Mexican theatre and its context during the period 1965-1970:

> These years brought to a head—to a crisis—Latin America's unresolvable tensions and contradictions. "Crisis," as I understand the term, does not signal a specific left-wing or right-wing ideological crisis. [. . .] Rather, I refer to crisis in the more general sense of a "turning point" between death and regeneration, taking into account both the *objective* systemic shifts or ruptures (revolution, military takeovers, wars and civil wars) that affect the nature of the society as a whole and the *subjective*, personal experience of disorientation and loss of identity. [. . .] Theatre of crisis mirrors the *effects* of sociopolitical crisis. (6-7)

Such objective shifts can be identified in contemporary Mexican society, and the resulting subjective experiences can be traced in a series of events that have received national and international attention. Many Mexican critics point to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's efforts to launch Mexico into the global market through neoliberal economic policy as effecting most acutely (and negatively) the middle and lower economic classes. Widening gaps between the rich and poor, and consequent frustration and alienation (Cansino 32-34), manifest themselves in such events as the January, 1994, peasant uprisings in Chiapas (Poncela; Womak). Recent statistics, including those of UNICEF, show the number of homeless, especially children, increasing dramatically (Gargallo). In social terms, marginal groups such as indigenous peoples and homosexuals have experienced a marked increase in human rights abuses (Lozano; Rodríguez), and the incidence of violent crimes against women has risen dramatically (García).

Politically, Mexico is caught between twenty-year-old calls for reform and the ever-present corruption of a one-party system. In power for seventy years, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*'s monopoly of the political system is seen as a mockery of serious desires to democratize Mexico's social and political institutions (Bartra 1-24). Official censorship is common, reaching a high point during the North American Free Trade Agreement negotiations (de la Grange).[3]

The public "spectacle" of politics, characteristic of the paternalistic approach of the forces of power, thrives in Mexico (Monsiváis in Womak 5). At a time when Mexico's cultural landscape is being altered by foreign consumer products, the Mexican ruling elite utilizes the technology of mass media to perpetuate a myth of national unity[4] and democratic reform.

I will argue, however, that possibilities for resistance to such oppressive, patriarchal institutions exist and can be located in the cultural (among other) spaces created by artists and writers like Carmen Boullosa and in texts like *Aura y las once mil virgenes*. In Boullosa's theatre and fiction, the overlapping of the intent to de-naturalize the categories of knowledge which have historically been accepted as "truth" (religion, history, etc.) and to expose the politics of all representation marks a first step in effecting change toward a more democratic society. The spectator's awareness of the mechanisms of representation and of his or her position as "spectator" in the public spectacle is a goal of Boullosa's theatre. She accomplishes this through her use of parody, satire and irony. Her craft engages the viewer in a process of decoding and interpretation that underscores his or her complicity with (and perpetuation of) the social and aesthetic practices being represented and criticized.

Boullosa's use of parody can be most appreciated within Linda Hutcheon's definition of, and distinctions between, parody, satire, and irony. In *A Theory of*

Parody and *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon posits modern parody as repetition with critical distance which marks difference rather than similarity: a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion not only of literary (written) forms, but of any codifiable discourse (music, visual art). It can be serious criticism, but not necessarily of the parodied text. Parody has both conservative and revolutionary potential. Its very nature inscribes continuity while permitting critical distance. That is, by reproducing a text, parody reinscribes its value without necessarily negative commentary, although that possibility exists. Parody's range of intent goes from respectful admiration to biting ridicule.

Parody may be used to satiric ends. Satire is always both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention. Satire uses parody as a "vehicle for ridiculing the follies or vices of humanity with an eye toward their correction" (Hutcheon 1985, 53). The distinction, Hutcheon suggests, between a parody that uses the parodied text as a target or one that uses it as a weapon, lies in the encoded intent of irony. Irony not only marks a contrast between an intended and stated meaning, but also functions to signal evaluation, most frequently of a negative nature (Hutcheon 1985, 52).

Boullosa employs parody and satire, inscribing various possibilities of intent (satirical parody and parodic satire) in order both to represent "reality" and to question the possibility of its representation. Via the double-voiced nature of parody (it reinscribes and critiques), Boullosa calls upon her reader/spectator to actively participate in the decoding of her intent, thus making it more an active than passive experience. In the play *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, Boullosa collides a variety of modes of representation: high and classical art, advertising jingles, popular music forms, Biblical references, film, commercial art, classical and popular drama. In this way, while Boullosa works from within the conventions she seeks to deconstruct and destabilize, she increases the accessibility of her critique and maximizes the spectators' ability to decode each representation and her layers of ironic intent. The pleasure of this parody's irony is found not only in Boullosa's humor, but also in the degree of engagement of the reader/spectator.

Further involving the audience in the creative process and in social criticism, Boullosa "pins down" her texts into the specific context of present-day Mexico. Whether the setting is Mexico City of the 1980s (*Aura*), 17th century pirate ships in the Caribbean (*Son vacas, somos puercos*), witches' parties held in some space above the earth (*Cocinar hombres*), or the Virgin Mary's and St. Joseph's bedroom (*Propusieron a María*), Boullosa's text is in dynamic relationship with the contemporary Mexican context in which it is generated. Thus, the overlapping of postmodernist vision and feminist critique are articulated through the use of a literary style that moves the reader/spectator to reexamine his or her

sociocultural landscape, and to become aware of his or her complicity with repressive structures and representations, a first move toward effecting real social change.

This strategy can be seen in *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, the first piece in Boullosa's *Teatro herético*, a collection of three short plays whose commonality lies in the mixture of technical forms that all employ, and in the interconnection of a variety of social, political, and artistic discourses. All three utilize parody to reproduce popular and classical forms, and satire and irony to distance the new representations with a critical tone. In that way, *herético* not only refers to the defiant manner in which Boullosa treats "sacred" themes and to her experimentation within the genre of theatre, but also to her vision of "absurd" social realities which are the *materia prima* of her theatre. Beginning with the works' titles—*Cocinar hombres: obra de teatro íntimo*, *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, *Propusieron a María* [the Virgin]—Boullosa pulls the audience into her world and prohibits us from slipping into the patterns of reception common to mimetic art. Rather, we are confronted with postmodern interpretations that challenge the very category of "real."

Boullosa created a space in which such challenges can be articulated by establishing in Coyoacán, Mexico City, over ten years ago, El Hijo del Cuervo, her own off-center theatre-bar—an unusual occurrence in the male-dominated economic structure of Mexico. Originally "El Cuervo," (then co-owned with Jesusa Rodríguez), here Boullosa has collaborated with avant-garde theatre and performance artists such as Jesusa Rodríguez, Liliana Felipe, and Maris Bustamante. El Hijo del Cuervo provides a venue for experimentation and intellectual exchange. Nightly features include a variety of performances, live music, and poetry readings and often features young, new artists marginalized by Mexican commercial and canonical theatre. El Hijo has also served as a gathering place for the artistic and intellectual crowd of Mexico City.

All three plays of *Teatro herético* were first performed in El Hijo. *Aura y las once mil vírgenes: una comedia*, opening in April, 1985, is a play dedicated to and starring the well-known Alejandro Aura: a successful actor and television personality, award-winning poet and critic, and previous director of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, who also happens to be Boullosa's husband in real life. The character he plays, also named Aura, is a failed, mediocre, frustrated advertising agent in Mexico City who lacks ambition in terms of his work and his life—an easily recognizable humorous inversion for the Mexican audience (Hernández).

In the play, the depressed Aura dreams that he is visited first by an angel and finally by "El Unico" (The Only One, i.e., God) who offers him a Faustian or Don Juanesque deal that he cannot refuse, for it is, as Boullosa states, "la

fantasía de la sexualidad masculina" (PI). Aura will become the most successful and creative advertising agent in Mexico if he "deflowers" eleven thousand virgins before they die in order to assure their immediate passage to Purgatory. El Unico explains that due to the poverty of the Third World, thousands of people are dying and going directly to Heaven, causing terrible economic problems, since the cost of living there is very high. Thanks to "sinning" (having sex with Aura), the virgins will spend time in Purgatory, thus easing Heaven's financial burden. In ironic twists on the Faustian theme, Aura is selling not his own soul, but those of the virgins; the deal is not made with the Devil, but with God.

Boullosa's parody revisits the Bible and its establishment of a hierarchical structure that invests all power and wisdom in one *masculine* figure—a structure that is repeated in Mexico's political, social, religious, and economic institutions. She also rewrites other canonical dramatic texts that themselves have been reproduced in many artistic forms (painting, film, opera). Looking outwardly to society, Boullosa's parody comments on men's use of women for their exchange value, on women's "damaged" status as established in the Bible (Lerner 10), on masculine control of feminine body and soul (in the name of Church and State), and on the state of Mexico's present relations with more developed countries. The less fortunate form part of the exchange value for growth that benefits the economic, political, and cultural elites in a system where monetary success often conflicts with traditional Mexican values. It might also refer to the attraction to the "paradise" up North, the movement across the U.S.-Mexico border, where those venturing "up" often find economic and spiritual hardship instead of utopia.

Aura's acceptance of the pact is rewarded with corporal gratification and financial success due to his new-found creative talent. The virgins serve as his Muses. Inspired by their "defects" (body hair, timidity, facial skin blotches, body odor), after each sexual encounter Aura goes on to create TV commercials that are reviewed by the clients and the audience. Written and produced by Boullosa and her brother Pablo, the ads are interspersed throughout the play (described in footnotes) and integrated into the stage production as five super-8 filmed commercials. A parody of commercial art, in each a consumer product is presented.

In that way, the evolving commercial art form of mass culture of contemporary consumer society is incorporated into the genre of theatre. The Boullosas' commercials—a mixture of high and popular art—represent what has been referred to as "postmodern style"—that is, those specific reactions to Modernism's established "superior" forms that have "conquered" the institutions of "high" art, such as universities, museums, and art galleries. This new mixture diffuses or erodes the distinctions between high Culture and what is called popular culture or culture of the masses (Canclini 49-57).

This postmodern style permits Boullosa to inject a feminist critique of the relationship between the individual and the new social order of the consumer society in which, like Aura, he or she often finds him or herself overwhelmed. The author shows this relationship to be mediated by the attempted (and unfortunately often successful) manipulation by the mass media of concepts such as "beauty" and "individual value" which permeate consumer society and are criticized as prescribing specifically masculine criteria for females' self-identity, self-worth, and desire (de Lauretis 1987, 9-10). In Mexico, there is much discussion among feminists on this subject. The entire July, 1993, issue of the newspaper *La jornada*'s monthly feminist supplement, *Doble jornada*, was dedicated to the impact that images of beauty established by Western models (usually from Europe or the U.S.) have on Mexican women of all classes and ethnic groups. These images are seen as serving a capitalistic system that results in an imperialism of the female body and sexuality.

In *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, Boullosa takes advantage of her audience's familiarity with the commercial art form—its jingles and its style of product presentation—as well as their familiarity with the texts parodied. Direct links to the Mexican context are made in the ads through the jingles that incorporate traditional popular Latin American rhythms such as the cha-cha-cha and the tango. In Mexico, in order to "transcontextualize" the consumer pitch, commercials advertising U.S. products often replace English with Spanish and include popular culture particular to Mexico. In this way, the audience is engaged in Boullosa's humorous, yet biting, commentary.

Aura's commercials are hailed as artistic masterpieces, and clients award him huge accounts for his continued production. As he "works," the spectator accompanies the character in his oneiric wanderings. Aura's deliriums oscillate between erotic pleasures (he "attends to" two thousand virgins during the play) and the projections of the ads he creates, which are inspired by the peculiarities of the virgin muses. For example, the first commercial is "Jabón Señor" ("Señor" in Spanish is the equivalent of "Sir" or can refer to "our Lord"). In the place of the INRI sign on a crucifix, we find a bar of soap; in a representation of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting, "Creation," a bar of Jabón Señor floats between God and Adam; in a shot of a well-known fountain of Mexico City, instead of the statue of the goddess Diana, we find Aura, washing his feet with the soap and commenting on the oh-so-dirty Mexican water.

In each case, the parody does not necessarily criticize the mechanisms of commercial art or the value of classic art, but rather shows how one form—high art—has been incorporated into another—commercial art. Here we can see how Hutcheon's broad definition of parody permits us to separate and analyze the various layers of Boullosa's text: on one level, by reproducing recognized pieces

of art or religious icons, she reinscribes their value in the Western art tradition and emphasizes postmodernism's leveling of the barriers in contemporary society of high and popular art.

On another level, by examining their symbolic value as sociocultural texts (as opposed to their aesthetic value), we can appreciate Boullosa's critical distancing between the text parodied and the new text: Michelangelo's *Creation* underscores God the Father's passing of life, knowledge, and thus power to Man (Adam), who represents *all* humankind. Ironically, what is being passed on in the ad is a consumer product. The ad featuring the Crucifix also includes an important icon in an Hispanic Catholic nation such as Mexico: the crucifix as a symbol of Man's sinfulness and his redemption (a cleansing, as the soap will provide) through God's Son's suffering.

In Mexico, it is important to note, religious icons, especially the Virgin of Guadalupe, have been manipulated by the government, especially in this century, as a form of social control (Franco 103-129). The Catholic Church and religion have played, and continue to play, major roles in the creation of national identity and in the structuring of social roles seen as repressive to many groups marginalized from the center of power (Monsiváis; Franco).[5] Thus, the humorous parody of religious icons and canonical texts in commercial art, itself not criticized, serves as an exposé of the always political—and always gendered, feminists argue—process of representation (Hutcheon 1985, 1989).

The statue of *Diana*, refurbished in 1993, is one of the most recognizable landmarks and popular gathering points of center-city Mexico. For example, after a major sports victory or during other national celebrations, Mexicans crown Diana and celebrate in the plaza below. This sense of pride ironically contrasts with the reality in which the statue sits: the center of a city literally poisoned by air and water pollution and choked by traffic. Also ironic is that the traffic circle in which this landmark is set is often the site of tent-cities of demonstrators who come from around the Republic to protest the government's indifference to the poor.[6] The humor of some of his images in the fictional text does not undercut the seriousness of the real issues to which the images refer.

The other commercials are similar in tone. "Gelatina La Cogida" (Gelatin The Screwed) is made desirable as we watch in voyeuristic fashion—peeping through a keyhole—a couple frolicking in bed (made of gelatine and appropriately vibrating with their movements) in a house of prostitution. They are having a wonderful time playing while consuming the product. In "Crema Virgilínea," an exotically decorated bottle of Virginline Cold Cream appears on the screen with the modern buildings of Mexico City in the background and a virgin dressed as a North American football player in the foreground, implying, among other things, North American presence in Mexican consumer society. The

woman looks into the camera as she rubs the cream on her face through the football helmet's mask. She looks seductively at the viewer who is observing her. But how "seductive" is a model in a football uniform especially since, on one level, American football is a sport where brute force is a most important attribute? Her seductiveness, then, is countered by the violence (of the sport, of imposed standards of beauty) implied in this ironic inversion.

In these two ads Boullosa makes the spectator aware of his or her position as *observer*, voyeur. She does this by having the audience preview the ads along with Aura's client, and by framing one scene with the keyhole and another through of the eye of the camera's lens. The spectator's self-conscious position is important in feminist aesthetic and social critique, as it moves to avoid identification and leads to critical distancing. Feminist artists attempt to escape what Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't* refers to as the "male gaze." She argues that women have historically remained the object of that gaze, not the subject, even when the gazer is a woman:

> The woman is framed by the look of the camera as icon, or object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator, whose look is relayed by the look of the male character(s). The latter not only controls the events and narrative action but is 'the bearer' of the look of the spectator. (138-39)

Film's formal mechanisms include the control of the viewer's gaze by controlling the dimensions of time and space. Laura Mulvey posits that appeals are made to the "scopophilic instinct," the pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object which, in "masculine" films, highlights woman's to-be-looked-at-ness (25). Desires and pleasure, however, are constructed within a range of signifying practices, and therefore that "look" can be interrupted (Mulvey 11). Therein, Hutcheon stresses, lies the revolutionary power of feminist representations that shake the spectator out of passive viewing. These norms, as human constructs, are authoritative only to those who have constructed or at least accepted them *a priori*. Boullosa, I argue, achieves such an interruption of the look in the film projection of each of the ads by her presentation of the virgins as both desirable and repulsive, a move that underscores the arbitrariness and unnaturalness of many of the norms used to set standards for female beauty.

Boullosa's use of film within her play not only presents a postmodernist vision of the fluidity of generic boundaries in contemporary art and mass media. It also involves the spectator in a feminist exercise of active participation that foregrounds the ideological underpinnings of representation (and of gender construction), and the manipulation of the social subject's identity, desire, and

body for commercial and political ends. The stage directions call for the virgins to be played by the same actress: "Todas y cada una de las vírgenes: una actriz. Debe ser evidente que ella representa todos los papeles, aunque su vestuario y su voz cambien de una aparición a otra." This strategy creates a condensed image, a category, "Woman," with variations being only non-essential items: clothing, changes in voice. Each of the virgins represented (four are actually presented) varies from the socially constructed image of "Woman," but the variation, the individualizing characteristic, is a perceived "flaw" that each possesses. Ultimately, each flaw inspires Aura to create a commercial of a product aimed at its elimination: too much body hair, Cachacha Champú; body odor, Jabón Señor; skin spots, Crema Virgilínea.

Boullosa presents here, in exaggerated, comical form, those mechanisms used to construct the image of the "perfect, feminine woman." In the play, these "pitiful" virgins obviously do not match that image. Such imperfections might be used to explain the women's virginal, non-married status. In their natural state, they are just too "ugly" to be desirable to any man. For Aura, then, these women serve only one basic need: sex. Boullosa strips away the decorative layers of the construction of desire in capitalistic society and exposes her view of its core: the domination of women for male pleasure.

A consideration of the representations of the virgins is important as it relates to Boullosa's feminism and to the positioning of the spectator. The use of exaggerated figures avoids any direct identification with them; nonetheless, their complaints—basic human functions and characteristics here seen as gross and cruel mistakes of nature—form part of contemporary feminist discourse that examines the real violence generated by images of "feminine beauty."

This is not, however, just a representation of woman-as-victim. Part of the "pitifulness" of the virgins is their exaggerated lack of will. Like sheep following a shepherd, they accept blindly a directive from some voice to seek their salvation in Aura, who will do nothing less than save them from themselves—a salvation that has both religious and commercial critical overtones. *They* take themselves to be sacrificed (aided by a female angel's intervention) to false claims posing as truths. Here we see represented women's complicity with the systems that repress them, a complicity which has been criticized in Mexican literature since the decade of the sixties. Rosario Castellanos in her work, especially her play *The Eternal Feminine* (1973) and her essay "The Liberation of Love"[7] (1970), humorously mocks Mexican women who rhetorically espouse North American and French feminist attitudes. She criticizes their passing on patriarchal myths and norms to daughters. In this way, women participate in and perpetuate their own oppression. Both Castellanos and Boullosa insist that men are not the only "victimizers" and women not only (nor the only) "victims."

In *Aura*, such an awareness of complicity occurs in the male protagonist. Aura's fulfillment of fantasies of physical pleasure proves to be an illusion. Sex becomes routine and dictated by his business contract with El Unico, here representative of an invisible and ever-present power structure. After a short period of relative gratification, Aura gets worn out. The joy of the "conquest" of the virgins is lost, underscoring again the constructed nature of pleasure and desires. Aura, horrified when he realizes that the virgins suffer because of his pleasure, breaks the contract with El Unico and returns to his original depressed state.

What the characters and the spectators are left with are the exposed inner-workings of the technologies of gender and sex. The audience participates as voyeurs, invading—as do the sociopolitical and economic structures of Mexican society—the private spaces of individual social subjects. Intimate sexual relationships are seen as part of the program for the healthy growth of capitalist society. We witness the resulting confusion in the characters about themselves, their identity, their desires: "No sé quién soy," remarks Aura when he decides to break his contract with El Unico, even at the cost of losing his thriving business. "Se acabó la ilusión." The illusion of the naturalness of discourses and unmediated representation is over.

In the play, through parodic and ironic distancing and inversion, Boullosa mediates these images, politicizing the "gaze" and the representation of woman-as-object-of-desire as opposed to subject-with-desires. The spectator, actively engaged in the decoding of the various levels of parody and satiric critique, is made aware of his or her complicity with the conventions criticized. This move to undermine and expose the politics of representation is common to both feminism and postmodernism. Feminists, however, point to the gendered nature of those politics, and move to dismantle and destabilize them.

Throughout *Aura*, the self-reflective nature of postmodern parody is evident. For instance, after Aura loses his creative powers, we see a commercial for Boullosa's theatre-café, El Hijo del Cuervo, where the play was first produced. The tone is critical, showing a filthy place with horrible service and food, and outrageous prices. Here her use of parody is self-reflective, respectful, with its ironic humor casting a "playful" critical tone.

The play closes with a song and dance number in the style of a Broadway musical, with all the actors participating. In Mexico, the Broadway musical is both hailed and criticized. Major shows have run very successfully (*Phantom of the Opera*). Historically, however, as Diana Taylor notes, foreign commercial successes with elaborate marketing mechanisms tend to displace local theatrical activity (13). At the same time, the influence of Broadway-style "theatre of image," spectacular and very expensive, on Mexican commercial theatre is often

criticized by theatre critics and practitioners as costing enormous sums of money and lacking substance (Enríquez PI).

The aesthetic and social critique in *Aura* must be viewed on several levels. On one hand, an attempt is made to represent the artistic values that can be traced within the commercial art world. Critic Salvador Oropesa comments, "Bohemia showed the artist to be against capitalism, postmodernity shows the artist how capitalism works, how to use capitalist tools if not to change it, at least to draw the attention of the people to the problems raised in the world after the Cold War" (3). Boullosa and her art form part of a postmodern phenomenon in Mexico, seen in the reaction of writers today to the avant-garde and the grandeur of the "Boom" in Latin American writing, a reaction which can be situated historically in Mexico in the writing after the 1960s, specifically after the student demonstrations and massacre at Tlatelolco (1968) and the earthquake of 1985. Boullosa's play is a challenge to Mexican consumer society of the 1980s, "not just a difference in the sense of an evolutionary process, but a *différance* because there is a change in the syntagmatic chain" (Oropesa 3).

In her work, Boullosa politicizes and recovers from its masculinist and patriarchal underpinnings erotic human desire which feminists claim has always been denied women and which postmodernists postulate is lost to all by a "recessionary erotic economy brought about by fear of disease, by a fetishization of fitness" (Hutcheon 1989, 142) and by commercial mass media's trivialization of sexuality. The feminist concept of the personal as political to which Boullosa subscribes becomes obvious in the "selling" of the virgins' souls, in the use of religious symbols in the construction of hierarchical institutions that have marginalized women as social subjects, and in commercial art's use of women's bodies and desires—representations that are socially constructed—for profit motives. Aura's rejection of the "system" at the play's end can be seen as a political act. The move to foreground the personal as political (the subjective experience of objective systemic shifts) resists one of the limiting differences between postmodernism and feminism: postmodernism's lack of agency which would permit a politics of change, so central to feminism. Boullosas' texts incarnate both.

It does not go unnoticed, however, that Boullosa's brand of feminism is not universally accepted (which points to the existence of "feminisms" and underscores diversity). The use of parody has been criticized by some feminists who seek to replace masculine representations of women in literature with corrective ones as a requisite for feminist critique (Moi 2). Boullosa's humor and use of parody, I suggest, fall within Hutcheon's description of postmodernist parody as "a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations" (1985, 95), a form of

parody which coincides with feminist objectives. Her playful style of challenging the selective process of legitimation and authority within sociocultural norms and artistic canons—that is, her postmodern style—affords Boullosa innovative modes of "rewriting" culture.

The play's criticism of the traditional models of interpretation and of the sociopolitical mechanisms impinging upon formulations of the categories of sex, gender, and intimate relationships, situate the play *Aura* within current feminist debates. Boullosa's style and technique—self-reflective, fragmentary, fantastic, and parodic—situate her work within postmodern debates. This intersecting of aesthetics and politics forces us to expand the parameters of critical discussions of contemporary Mexican culture, of the terms "feminist" and "feminism," of the concepts of "good" or "high" art, and of the literary canon itself.

To close, it is important to note that Boullosa and her artistic production are not an isolated case in contemporary cultural production in Mexico, but form part of a larger project of Mexican intellectuals and artists to open up the very rigid sociopolitical and cultural structures in order to devise strategies that will permit Mexico to survive its present crisis or, as some prefer, its present period of transition.

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Notes

1. Throughout this essay, *PI* refers to personal interviews conducted in Mexico City from 1990-1993. All translations are mine.

2. In the past, divisive socioeconomic issues have hindered efforts to unite, as women of a particular class would identify first with other women and men of their own class rather than with women of a different socioeconomic group. This divisiveness can be seen in the now-famous speech by Domitila Barrios de Chungara to the "Tribuna del Año Internacional de la Mujer" in Mexico City, in which she challenges the Mexican delegation (upper-class) chair's authority to represent *all* Mexican women, with whom, in the vast majority of cases, she has very little in common (Castillo 13-14).

3. In recent editorials in Mexican newspapers such as *La jornada*, the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement drew strong criticism from some Mexicans. They see the dominant political and commercial powers as selling out to the United States by once again putting Mexico in a position of dependence that will in their view, among other things, flood Mexican markets with consumer products that threaten to homogenize the culture and language of Mexico (i.e., music, film, food, fashion). The autonomy of the Mexican government is also seen as threatened, as the U.S. made democratic reform, control of environmental pollution, human rights, and minimum wage laws stipulations for the treaty's signing.

4. This can be seen in the government program, *Solidaridad*, which since 1990 has been defusing anti-PRI sentiment in poor urban and rural areas by infusing money and technical support

into communities that lack even the most basic social services. Coupled with a mass media blitz (T.V. and radio ads, billboards, murals) that reaches into even the remotest areas of the nation, *Solidaridad* attempts to generate renewed nationalism, here seen not as progressive but reactionary. In this populist project, physical violence and repression are replaced by capital investment in order to bring the opposition into line (Cansino 32-36).

5. During President Salinas' tenure Mexico has reestablished official ties with the Vatican, broken off 150 years ago, a move criticized by many (Barbieri). During his two recent visits to Mexico, the Pope reaffirmed the Church's stance against any kind of birth control and spoke out against changing women's roles to fit the needs of contemporary society (Barbieri 357-58), this in a country where overpopulation exacerbates strains on available social services and resources, and physical violence against women is the number one crime (García). He condemned homosexuals who, in the last few years, have been subjected throughout the country to violent physical attacks that have led to deaths (Rodríguez). The Pope reviewed and has threatened to remove the bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz García of Chiapas (the site of the January, 1994, peasant revolts), a long time proponent and protector of the human and civil rights of the indigenous populations and a 1994 nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize (Aranda 12). This occurs at a time when Amnesty International reports that torture and abuse are common in Mexico (*La jornada*).

6. During my seven research visits from 1990 to 1993, I witnessed six different groups camped in this space, ranging from teachers from various regions, especially the southern, poorer states, to the unemployed, fishermen, and indigenous groups from Chiapas and Oaxaca.

7. Both the play and the essay have been translated and published in Ahern's important critical anthology *A Rosario Castellanos Reader* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1988). Castellanos is considered the mother of modern feminist thought in Mexico. Many of her important essays anticipate the French feminist theorists Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray in their linking of sexuality with textuality, and female oppression with language. Ahern's work is an excellent introduction to Castellanos' feminist critique and her broad and varied literary production.

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