

Abolición de la propiedad: Mexican Experimental Theatre

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In 1964-65, with the publication of José Agustín's *La tumba* (Mexico: Editorial Novaro) and *Gazapo* (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz) by Gustavo Sainz, a new literary movement began in Mexico that has come to be known as "*la onda*", a literature of adolescents born in the age of rock and roll with a new idiom of hip slang and constantly flowing play of words. "*La onda*" introduced a new set of themes similar to those of J. D. Salinger and the teenage movies of the United States.¹ Like all new generations it was and still is highly iconoclastic with respect to the established names in Mexican literature, and more importantly with respect to the traditional modes of writing. At first the authors of "*la onda*" were considered lightweights in comparison with the supposedly serious writers, but the subsequent production of Agustín (*De perfil, Inventando que sueño, La nueva música clásica, Abolición de la propiedad, Círculo vicioso, Se está haciendo tarde*), Sainz (*Obsesivos días circulares*) and their stablemate René Avilés Fabila (*Los juegos, Hacia el fin del mundo, La lluvia no mata las flores, El gran solitario de palacio, La desaparición de Hollywood*) has proved that these young authors, all of whom began writing in their teens, are solid contributors to the best of Mexican literature and have been responsible for a new, healthy and exciting environment of experimentation in Mexico. Of the three, Agustín is the only one who has extended this experimentation to the theatre, an endeavor that interests us here.

In 1969 Joaquín Mortiz published *Abolición de la propiedad*, Agustín's fifth book. The small volume of 111 pages is not a novel, written as it is in dialogue like a play, the action taking place on a stage and all the movements of the two characters being described in terms of stage directions as are the descriptions of the setting. Yet it differs from a play in the usual sense in that it is written in first person, narrated by Norma, the female character, though often the impersonal stage directions indicate what is to take place on the stage. The use of the first

person, though striking and unusual, would present only a slight problem with respect to staging because practically all of Norma's first person interior thoughts could easily be conveyed visually in the usual manner of gesture and facial expression.

The real experimentation lies elsewhere, in the incorporation of other visual and auidial media into the theatre, namely film, slides, television, recording and live rock music, and the unusual movement of the action.

The stage represents a basement room with old chairs, a sewing machine, empty picture frames, etc., and innumerable mirrors that reflect the movements of the characters. A large armchair occupies the center of the stage; beside it there is an Ampex recorder of the type used in professional recording studios, topped by a metronome that paces the action, the music and the emotions. On the left, back and right there are projection screens on which moving pictures, slides and illuminated signs will appear whenever the recorder is playing. Closed circuit television monitors are also visible, but the author does not specify their location. Located stage left stands a rock band that will play intermittently.

The first scene will serve to illustrate how the action proceeds, making use of the diverse media. Norma enters the unfamiliar room, sits in the armchair and turns on the recorder. She is surprised to hear herself conversing with a young man named Everio, whom she has never met and to whom she has never spoken. While she listens to the strange recording, her image is projected in a close-up on one of the lateral screens. On the screen she is talking, though the film is not precisely synchronized with the recording, and throughout the action this slight non-synchronization continues whenever the film and the recording accompany one another. When Norma reacts to the recording, her facial expressions are projected on the rear screen. She turns off the recorder, fading out the screens as well, but then the rock band begins to play as the stage lights fade also, drawing attention to a projected sign on the screen stage left telling us that "Norma has entered a basement where she hears her own voice, but for the moment she is alone." (p. 13) A powerful spotlight focuses on Norma; she stands, advances towards the audience and accompanied by the rock music sings a soliloquy. When she ends her song, the band proceeds to develop the theme of the soliloquy musically while slides are flashed on the screen stage left, showing Norma singing. She then speaks another monologue over the music. When the stage lights return, Norma is sitting in the armchair again, and scene two begins with the entrance of Everio.

This procedure continues throughout the play. Everio, who has a problem controlling his kidneys when he gets nervous, makes several exits to relieve himself, and each time he does so, Norma listens to the recorder, hearing the two of them talk, always in conversations that have not occurred yet, but that come about when Everio re-enters. However, the possibility of a cyclical return is implied when Norma says, first on the recording and then in actual dialogue with Everio, that she feels as if all this had happened before.

The plot is the confrontation of two fundamentally opposite types: Norma, the young liberal who believes in love, justice, revolution, personal freedom, non-conformity, etc.; and Everio, a young conservative who believes in conforming to society, the validity of national traditions and the established moral absolutes.

In the beginning they enter into the game of light talk full of constant witty put-downs, often based on phonological word play, so common among the younger generations in Mexico City. However, their differences begin to become apparent. Everio denies that he is a "macho mexicano" as she calls him, but his attitudes would certainly classify him as a male chauvinist of the Mexican type. Norma, though she tries to control herself, cannot resist the temptation to irritate him and even insult him. At times the witty aggressiveness that is usually an accepted commonplace tone among the groups these two come from moves them almost inevitably towards insults. It is as if the words themselves, so often repeated in the continual word games, take on a surprising autonomy and, becoming the masters of the game, flow before the speaker realizes their implications and possible effects. A good example occurs when Everio, with obvious nostalgia and seriousness, is telling Norma about his ex-wife:

Everio: Tenía ojos café, nariz recta y una cicatriz gigantesca en el muslo derecho, la operaron del apéndice.

Norma: ¿Así le dicen ahora a los abortos? (p. 48)

The dialogue oscillates between this light repartee and the verge of open argument, the latter finally erupting when Norma teases Everio about his divorce and his lack of virility.

The second to the last time Everio exits, the recorder, the film and the slides reveal that Everio will strangle Norma. When he returns, out of fear she finally tells him about the prophetic conversations, especially the last one; but when she tries to play the tape for him, only music is heard. Everio is incredulous, denying he would ever harm her, but the subsequent dialogue moves slowly to the conversation that will lead to the strangling. Norma accuses him of being a conformist robot without any ideas of his own. When she expresses pity for him, he retorts by calling her super-conceited and crazy. The argument degenerates into sexual insults and when she repeats the "Macho mexicano" slur, he threatens her. Instead of stopping, Norma multiplies the insults mercilessly until Everio finds himself strangling her. When he realizes that he is fulfilling her prediction he stops and exits.

Norma, frightened and visibly shaken, turns on the recorder once more, but instead of revealing the conclusion, we hear the beginning again with the corresponding images on the screens. Does the recorder now reinforce the cyclical return theme indicated earlier, or did Norma simply rewind the tape too far, leaving the inevitable ending still to be played out? Either interpretation is possible, for when Everio returns and Norma confesses that she is terrified, Everio approaches her only to stop just short of the armchair, staring at her strangely, cruelly; but before he can do anything, the action freezes.

The following quote from the end of the last scene will give the reader some idea of the style, the use of technical television language and the elements involved in the staging.

Norma: Me das mucho, mucho miedo.

Exhala aire, gruñendo. Frunce aún más el entrecejo. Se levanta, camina unos pasos hacia mí y siento que mi respiración se agita hasta el máximo.

Estoy verdaderamente aterrada.

Queda muy cerca de mí, mirándome con la mirada muy dura, muy extraña, cruel. Sin darme cuenta me vuelvo para mirarlo también, alzo la cabeza, mostrando mi cuello enrojecido.

Se proyecta un cartón:

QUE QUIERES HACER, EVERIO.

Nos quedamos quietos en esa posición y:

en la pantalla derecha se proyecta la misma imagen congelada;

en la pared lateral derecha se proyecta una transparencia de la misma imagen, bajo el cartón;

en los espejos se repite, extática, la misma imagen;

en los monitores queda emplazada, en two shot, la misma imagen;

lentamente se descuelga una gran fotografía, fotomural, en blanco y negro contrastado, de grano muy abierto, de la misma, idéntica imagen;

la música continúa ahora con una sola nota sostenida de fuzz y órgano, muy rasposa, unificando las imágenes.

Durante veinte segundos todo queda paralizado,

hasta que el proyector de diez mil golpea, a los dos, como en un medium shot. Todo sigue paralizado.

Cesa la música. Sólo se escucha el ritmo lento, a todo volumen y con mucho eco, del metrónomo. (pp. 110-111)

The conflict is one common to the present social situation, known to us by the overworked cliché of the generation gap, but Agustín personifies it refreshingly in two young people instead of resorting to the simplification of adult versus youth. In this fashion the conflict takes on more universal transcendence, focusing on two basic manners of facing life, while at the same time controlling the theme within the individual situation. We are always witnessing two young people gripped in the preoccupations of their age group, and from this base the theme expands to include those of their particular society and finally those of the world and mankind. The theme of conservative versus liberal is given a new treatment by concentrating it in two young people.

The tension created in the action is well paced and supported by the use of the various media. The forward thrust of the action toward the fulfillment of the unexplainable recording and film create a feeling of inevitable destiny, while the absurd aspects of the situation are obvious. However, the use of media processes that have become such an accepted part of modern life lend that absurdity a façade of truth and unquestionable reality. The tacit commentary on the effect of mass media on man is in the end brutally overwhelming.

The utilization of rock music and the singing of soliloquies reflects not only its popularity, but also the mythological value attributed to it by the young writers, a use similar to that recently seen in the film *American Graffiti*. The incorporation of rock music to the stage is now an accepted fact, but Agustín wrote *Abolición de la propiedad* in 1968 before the great success of *Hair* had begun the trend.

The Agustín touch that has made him so popular among the young readers and drawn the attention of the critics is especially well-suited to the theatre. The

language is quick, sharp, often employing the sounds themselves to form plays on words that reflect as well as carry the meaning, while establishing a smooth flow and a feeling of rhythm. However, one should keep in mind that Agustín utilizes a type of speech common in Mexico City, and his talent lies not in its invention, but in its successful incorporation into literature. Also, the use of the technical terms, often in English, such as "fade-out," "close-up," "big close-up," "fuzz tone," "panning," etc. demonstrates not only Agustín's personal involvement in television, cinema and recording, but also the pervasive presence of a new and very real consciousness of such terminology among the young intellectuals, and to a lesser extent their generation in general, who have grown up with the new media.

The obvious difficulties in staging *Abolición de la propiedad* are what have kept it from being presented. When I spoke to Agustín in 1972 at a rehearsal of his second play, *Círculo vicioso*, a more traditionally stageable play, he commented that the cost was prohibitive. It would involve the filming of several sequences, the taking of slides of the same action, the use of television cameras and monitors and finally the availability of a theatre adaptable to the equipment. The project would be more suitable for a university production where experimental theater is more of an artistic venture than an economic one. Perhaps in the future some North American university will seize on this exciting new experiment in Mexican theater and realize its presentation. Until then, it will probably remain a very interesting example of "la onda" in the theater and of José Agustín's wide ranging talent and his always entertaining literature.

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Notes

1. Some obvious examples are *Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blue Denim* and *A Summer Place* on the serious side, and the lighter musical type like *Rock Pretty Baby* on the other hand. Of great influence and in a special category within this general picture are the early films of Elvis Presley (*Love Me Tender*, *Loving You*, *Jailhouse Rock* and *King Creole*), to the writers of *la onda* a figure of mythical proportions alongside of the Beatles, whose movies also must be included, and the Rolling Stones. The influence of U.S. media, television as well as movies, becomes a complicated question when one considers that a movie released in the U.S.A. may not be shown in Mexico until some years later; and television programs that long ago vanished from even the syndicated circuit in the U.S.A., are still alive and well after countless reruns in Latin America. A prime example of the latter is *Route 66* that in 1972 was still being aired on prime time in Mexico City. An in-depth study of this type of influence on the literature of Mexico is lacking at the present time.