

Theatre and Mass Culture: Pedagogical Tools for Stimulating Critical Thinking

Analola Santana

In the cultural historiography of Latin America, a region marked by five centuries of social, cultural, and political change, the question of which interpretive categories to employ to comprehend social realities remains open to debate. Latin America has been described as peripheral, postcolonial, and postmodern, among other things. However, the changes brought about by the phenomenon termed “globalization” have made it imperative to rethink how we make sense of this great terminological variety. Analyzing theatrical or dramatic projects that refer to the effects of globalization, both directly or indirectly, is a useful and creative pedagogical tool in promoting critical thinking in the classroom.¹ In this essay I will use one performance from Mexico as a case study on how to approach such an analysis: Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes’ *De monstruos y prodigios* (2001). As company member and dramaturg of Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes, and thus on the basis of my work with the company and because of my personal knowledge of this production, I hope to provide a unique perspective from which to understand the work in relation to the theoretical questions that concern this essay.

There are various ways to discuss and approach the term “globalization.” In the analysis proposed here, we should understand it as the multinational integration and extension of markets whose defining characteristics include an increase in both physical and virtual communication (transportation and technology), an easing of state control, and a growing porousness across the borders of nation-states. Much of Latin America took this “neoliberal” turn in the 1990s, through the Washington Consensus, implementing and adopting policy changes that included the opening of markets for goods and capital, the privatization of state enterprises, and the removal of tariffs. In Mexico,

due to its unique relationship to the United States, the process began almost a decade earlier.²

If in present society information is available anytime and in any place, mass culture takes a special place in the classroom as a code of communication that is recognizable and accessible. In seeking to develop the ability to interpret, the question is how to create an autonomous space for critical thinking in which the availability of information does not become literal and thus preclude any possibility of interpretation. The study of the connections between art and mass culture is a long-standing tradition in aesthetic thought. Indeed, the overlap between the fields of the mediated and the factual has reconfigured what we conceive as “reality.” For this reason, I set aside judgments of value and approach the relationship between art and mass culture using the term “appropriation.” Ana María Amar Sánchez has noted, with regard to literature and mass culture, “*The way in which a text belonging to ‘highbrow’ literature uses, appropriates, and transforms the codes of mass culture [...] leads us to pay attention to how the uses of mass culture are never neutral; rather, they always produce tension and thus have the effect of creating an order, enshrining, or discrediting*” (13-14).³ If we apply the same reasoning to theatre, we should focus on the strategies used in art to question what is perceived as reality.

Mass culture is broadly defined as

a mode of cultural or public relation that takes form beginning towards the end of the 19th century, and more clearly in the first decades of the 20th. It refers to a heterogeneous scene made up of various publics and ethos. Various new media make their way onto this scene such as general and specialized magazines, printed photography and silent films. These *codes* and *sensibilities* bring about previously unknown cultural impressions. (Ossandón and Santa Cruz 9)

Mass culture is usually identified with cultural industries that produce monological modes of communication for a mass public or audience. The culture industry includes mass media (film, television, radio, newspapers, publishers, etc.) as well as political and cultural actors (museums, for example) that use these means to interact with a mass public. Studies of mass media (e.g. Adorno, Horkheimer, Mattelart) have been criticized for their focus on methods of domination and control. That is, these studies maintain that mass media impose the values and opinions of the dominant classes on the rest of society. This implies the unconscious manipulation of a receptive audience and the view of the media as omnipotent and omnipresent structures. Besides

the fact that the receptive audience is not as passive as this view would hold, a further serious problem with this line of thinking is that “power” should not be represented as blocks of fixed, institutional structures. As Michel Foucault has shown, power is a disseminated social relation. It is not a centralized or single point, but rather multiple relations of force that form by operating together in different spaces. We should, of course, emphasize that the different instances of power do form a hierarchy (e.g. there is a difference between a multinational corporation and a supermarket manager).

The relationship between different theatrical discourses or practices and the media of mass communication is not linear.⁴ Modern technology and the mass media have transformed how theatrical discourses are produced. Today, the mass media are an obligatory reference for theatrical production as they create a dominant discourse that helps to shape how everyday “reality” is perceived. The various forms of media that make up today’s cultural space coexist and intersect. In other words, it is no longer possible to speak of artistic discourse and mass media as separate entities. The points of contact between these two cultural modes produce a dynamic relationship, a tension that can lead to various modes of confrontation or fusion. Despite the attempt to banish works associated with the mass media to “low culture” and thereby exclude them from the canon, there have also been attempts to create spaces within “art” where highbrow and mass culture can come together. These efforts bring with them a recognition of cultural differences. By employing strategies of appropriation, the conflict between high and low culture is resolved; the artistic scene accepts cultural differences and tensions. In other words, the original meaning of both cultural codes changes in order to bring together forms and genres: “By appropriating popular forms and working at the limit of the two cultures, an unstable balance is formed in perpetual negotiation” (Amar Sánchez 23). Differences are recognized, but this is done through tactics of appropriation that bring about a process of transformation (of high culture) and modification (mass culture). In discussing theatricalities and mass culture, my purpose is to recognize the forms of reappropriation operating between these two cultural modes and to analyze the connections formed through this relationship.

What makes the reappropriation of mass culture in theatre unique, in my opinion, is its ability to activate experiences of the spectator/consumer in the present moment. The public feels excitement when it recognizes on stage forms with which it identifies. This effect is felt especially strongly in the classroom, as it gives students access to theatre and to the effects of theatre

without depending on the students' prior possession of a certain "cultural capital." Pedagogically, this effect is important. That is, this kind of theatre aims at critical thinking using codes that are accessible and recognizable by everyone and thus has a leveling effect on the accessibility of culture. Theatre reappropriates the media through a live body in a live situation. The audience thus identifies with a cultural object through the intersection of a mediated gaze and a live artistic experience. In this process of identification, it is important to consider the spectator as consumer. As Beatriz Sarlo has indicated, the possession of the object of consumption is an integral part of how identity is made. Consumption is significant because it constitutes the identity of the subject: "Transitory identity affects both inside-out collectors (those who collect acts of consumption rather than objects) and the rather less fortunate category of imaginary collectors. Both think that an object gives or would give them something they lack not at the level of possession—as something to have—but at the level of identity. Objects thus signify us: they have the power to give us certain meanings, and we are willing to accept them" (27). The mass media take up particularities of the people as consumers through certain fixed categories of consumption. It is the producer, of course, who directs the projection, but the act of projection onto the masses allows these characteristics to be approached from the other extreme, from the masses themselves. The culture produced by the mass media does not make anyone feel entirely excluded, so one cannot claim that this culture is accepted passively or perceived by everyone in the same way. Even those with few resources as consumers can make some use of the available products or have some way of accessing what the media give, be it real or imaginary. Many contemporary theatrical discourses have recognized this situation and use the projection of these codes to reconstruct and debate social realities.

We should not forget that theoretical consideration of mass culture is marked by antagonistic positions, especially in the Frankfurt School. However, the binary approach to mass culture—as Umberto Eco aptly put it, apocalyptic versus integrated intellectuals—tends to devolve into an essentialist debate between two irreconcilable positions. Because of this, new possibilities for scholarship and new approaches to mass culture were sought. Eco's studies, which have tried to sum up both positions and then resolve their differences, provide one such possibility. Eco acknowledges the pleasure that the repetition of mass culture gives. One example is literature, where the "repetition of an unchanging narrative schema" is comforting for the reader. In this way, a genre such as theatre can make use of the serial or repetitive

character of mass culture because the audience will recognize the formula. However, this recognition causes the audience to distance itself from the formula and to problematize the pleasure that the products of mass culture give. This process opens the way to other readings where consumption and provocation are not necessarily opposites. In reevaluating the concept of amusement and reappraising mass forms from what he calls the “postmodern attitude,” Eco gives us a way out of this impasse. We thus have an alternative to the traditional bipolarity mentioned above. Eco considers this use of mass culture a “reference,” which he describes as a “return to the plot even through references to other plots, and [...] these references could be *less comforting* than the plots they refer to [...]” (31).

When theatre makes reference to the products of mass culture, it is in part making use of easily recognized forms that provide comfort. However, by changing how these products are used on stage, theatre avoids the binary essentialism described above. This difference in use, which the spectators are supposed to notice, challenges their mediated gaze. The innovative link between theatre and mass culture lies precisely in theatrical performances’ use of references to mass culture.⁵ A good example of this process is the performance of *De monstruos y prodigios. La historia de los castrati* (*Of Monsters and Prodigies. The History of the Castrati*) (2001). Founded in 1997, Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes has become one of the most recognized companies in Latin America for its innovative and avant-garde staging, such as *Beckett, o el honor de Dios* (1998), *El automóvil gris* (2002), *¿Dónde estaré esta noche?* (2004), *La piel* (2006), *El Gallo* (2009), *Todavía... Siempre* (2012), and *La vida es sueño* (2013). Both the director and the company have received numerous prizes from the realm of specialized criticism, but it was with its second play, *Of Monsters and Prodigies*, that it burst onto the international stage. The play, written by Jorge Kuri, premiered in Spain and continued with a long and successful string of performances that lasted until 2011, when it was finally retired from the company’s repertoire.⁶ This performance uses the language of art as a hierarchical tool that allows for the construction or destruction of the aesthetic value of cultural objects. In the era of mass media, this allows one to explain the importance of the connection between the discourses of power and the creation of cultural products. The performance focuses on the process whereby a cultural product can initially form part of the official discourse only to be marginalized once it no longer shares the codes of the dominant historical discourse.

The performance was created with the purpose of being a didactic concert of sorts, as Claudio Valdés Kuri explains, since the text is written as a scientific treatise. These narrations/treatises are told by a few main characters who add their own performative subtext to the play, as they alter the dramatic text through their playful gestures and the incorporation of elements unrelated to the main purpose of the play/treatise (music, dance, mime, etc.). The theatrical text lacks any intrigue or action; it is a treatise that seeks to conduct an overview of the central issue: the rise and fall of the virtuous figure of the *castrato*. Theatre scholar Rosalina Perales suggests that the work “inserts the *castrati* as part of the marvels and monstrosities that history has created and from which no culture is exempt, not Mexico or Europe or Latin America” (175). The lack of specificity in terms of a “national” theme situates this performance within a global context that is more interested in showing the effects of hegemonic discourses on culture through a more impersonal perspective.

The play can be considered as theatre or opera, and it takes up an unprecedented artistic, social, and cultural phenomenon: the history of the *castrati*, who were both prodigies and monsters at the same time, children born in poverty and propelled to the range of stars in the frivolous constellation of the great courts of Europe.⁷ *Of Monsters and Prodigies* depicts different events in the lives of these opera singers, from the separation from their parents at an early age through the arduous training process and their triumph in the artistic scene of the time. The text gives an account of the success and decadence of the Italian *castrati*, culminating with the story of the last *castrato*, Alessandro Moreschi, who is not physically onstage, but whose voice is preserved in a record. The main narrative is interspersed with musical numbers that appear at different times during the performance and disrupt the structure of the more scientific narrative text. Accompanying the *castrato* onstage are a barber-surgeon and an opera critic, who happen to be conjoined twins named Jean and Ambroise Paré (of course, paying homage to the author and book that inspired the play). These two characters represent the extremes of science and art, and along with the singing teacher, Professor Galluppi, they are the narrative voices that guide the audience through this scientific conference that spans three centuries of history. Completing the set of monsters onstage are Quirón, a centaur who is also introduced as the Parés’ pupil, and Sulaimán, a “savage” slave from the Orient (as the Parés explain) who appears mostly naked except for an elaborate loincloth. Sulaimán is the first character whom we see; he is onstage as the audience enters the theater. Yet he remains silent throughout the play, simply obeying the orders given to him until the final

moments of the performance, when he is able to impose his own discourse and becomes a new protagonist of history. In the performance, the audience is taken on a three-century journey through a dramatized lecture, in an indeterminate place, transporting it from the extremes of the European Baroque to the technological 20th century, where beauty has been annihilated by reason.

I find this play especially useful in the classroom, as it allows for an analysis of the relationship between hegemonic discourse and the construction of art (as it is traced throughout this play), which leads to the questioning of the very nature of the object of art. In the era of mass communication, theatrical practices find new codes with which to perform and communicate with the receptor, yet the discourses that these practices produce depend on the cultural competency of the transmitter. Therefore, within Latin American theatrical discourses, it is possible to observe performance practices that highlight and sometimes question the role of official discourse in the production of cultural objects through the use of codes currently in use within their social imaginary. If theatre has traditionally been considered a work of art, it is not surprising that current performances that break with these traditionalist parameters go on to question the nature of the work of art and its cultural underpinnings. This performance problematizes the way in which a legitimizing language determines the symbolic and economic value of an artistic product and how this work of art can “decline” with the changes in what is considered “legitimate thought” throughout History. In this way, the play demonstrates how a cultural product can pass from being perceived as a work of art to a product of mass consumption, which is then rejected as a decadent monstrosity.

Throughout the history of art there has been an ongoing debate regarding what should be valued aesthetically and what remains outside of this legitimizing discourse. According to Immanuel Kant in the *Third Critique*, aesthetic value is imposed upon an object through the gaze of the perceiving subject, which associates aesthetics with beauty. At the same time, this gaze creates a legitimizing discourse that imposes, within the art world, a separation between what is considered artistically “pure” (beautiful and disinterested) and that which acquires an economic value. The second is dismissed as an object of mass consumption and, therefore, is not “artistic.” This division between what is considered artistic or not is an arbitrary one that is based on the opposition of binary categories such as “beautiful” and “horrible,” which are not very clear and based on mostly reductionist views. In the play *Monstruos y prodigios*, these categories are criticized not only because of

those reasons, but also because they are interchangeable depending on the legitimizing gaze of the time.

Within the theatrical text we are presented with a series of characters who embody the debate between beauty and monstrosity. This series of characters reflects an unfolding of personalities that manipulate “reality” within the performance through the use of duality. This binary condition is very obvious in the characters of the play; they each have their counterpart, their other, who complements them. It can even be observed within each individual character, since some have binary characteristics of their own. The conjoined twins, Jean and Ambrose Paré, are a dual character by nature. At the same time, they represent a second thematic duality in relation to the two extremes of hegemonic language: science and art. One is a surgeon, the other an opera commentator. There are also the characters of the mythological centaur Quirón and the slave Sulaimán, who represent discourses from another time and place. Quirón represents the animal within human rationality; half man, half beast, he is guided by both his animal/passionate instinct (which can be seen in his tendency to act in a sexually aggressive way) and by his highly intellectual reasoning. The main representative of this binary division is the *castrato* himself, a liminal being, somewhere between man and woman, who contains characteristics of both. The nature of these characters adapts as the hegemonic discourse evolves, since hegemonic discourse describes and determines the aesthetic and artistic value of the work of art. As the official discourse legitimizes forms, it also creates a hierarchical structure from which to divide the consumer as an individual in relation to the rest of society.

The *castrato* incorporates this legitimizing discourse, which at one time described him as the essence of pure art because of the enchantment produced by his magnificent voice:

AMBROISE: El arte de estos *virtuosi* consiste en la extrema sofisticación de la belleza, que se hace visible tanto en los fuegos de artificio vocales como en la exteriorización desgarradora del *pathos*, ya estos cantantes cuentan con una voz tan...

JEAN: Delicada...

AMBROISE: Tierna...

JEAN: Ágil...

AMBROISE: y potente, que no tienen dificultad alguna en subyugar a su público, hasta hacerlo llorar. (127)⁸

Yet he is also an example of the artifice implicit in the category of “beauty,” since his vocal feats are examples of an art that was surgically molded in

order to achieve beauty. The *castrato*, along with Italian opera, became a commercial product designed for mass consumption and enjoyment. This negation of the *castrato* as a “work of art” based on his commercial capacity leads back to Adorno, who maintained the notion that an object could not be considered art if it were incorporated into commercial production. In this performance, both opera and the figure of the *castrato* are examples of the commodification of art. In the play, there is a double understanding of art based on two periods: Romanticism and the Enlightenment. According to Enlightenment thought, it is this commodified understanding of art that brings about the downfall of Italian opera. Yet, we might ask whether or not the mediation brought forth by mass industries and technological advances are indeed incompatible with artistic creation. In other words, if a cultural object has commercial success, does it deny its legitimacy as a work of art?

Nevertheless, the commercial value of an artwork has the possibility of transforming it within the official conceptions of a period. The brothers Paré point out the economic advantages associated with transforming a young boy into a *castrato*, since sopranos are merchandise very much in demand and, as time passes, the impresarios will avidly come looking for opera stars. The *castrati* succumb to the market demands, which transform the Italian opera into a commercial product based on economic demand. The text comments upon the value of the work of art before market demands:

AMBROISE: Los empresarios de la ópera suelen quejarse de tener interminables dificultades, por lidiar con algunas exigencias de los castrados.

JEAN: Mientras que en Francia el empresario es el que manda... (138)⁹

Therefore, it is possible to say that as the Age of Enlightenment produces a hegemonic discourse based on reason, works of art (in this case, the *castrato*) are stripped of all symbolic value by becoming an object of mass consumption more concerned with the enjoyment of the consumer. The value of the *castrato* furthermore diminishes as his popularity rises, since lower social sectors join the elite as spectators, changing the nature of his consumer.

What this points to is the control that the market exercises over art. *De monstruos y prodigios* questions the value that is given to art that has been subordinated to economic powers. After all, who controls whom? And what does this exchange of power mean? According to the message that this performance imparts, it depends on the attitude that one takes with respect to a given artistic creation. For example, French dominant discourse, represented

in the performance through the philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment, shows the way in which the opera impresarios control artistic production based on reasoning. This creates an operatic production that is very different from what the Italians produced, which, for all its so-called decadence, is also a far more creative art form:

AMBROISE: Jean, la ópera es una celebración de placeres epidérmicos. ¿Qué valor pueden tener...

JEAN: las teorías y razonamientos...

AMBROISE: frente a la felicidad del momento? (139)¹⁰

One can appreciate a commentary on the nature of aesthetics in relation to mass consumption or the division made between what is considered artistically “beautiful” (art) and popularly “beautiful” (enjoyment). The performance questions the supposed incompatibility between simple enjoyment (consumption) and artistic meaning, which is determined by a legitimizing language that discards all that is related to mass consumption.

The legitimizing discourse of the Age of Enlightenment is questioned in the performance as the official language of the period. A clear example can be observed through the character of Sulaimán, the slave. Throughout the performance he is the victim of anger and violence from other characters, who constantly hurt him or yell at him. Yet it is Sulaimán who dares to use this official discourse to interrupt the ongoing debate between the brothers Paré regarding French reasoning. After insulting all in his native language, he yells “Je suis un homme, et je suis un homme libre, et je peux pedir tous que je vux. Vous etes des imbecils, des imbecils. L’egalité, liberté, fraternité!” (147). This cry is full of irony, since it is the slave who proclaims the human rights granted by the French Revolution. By asserting his rights, it is Sulaimán who becomes the masses who rise up and become the protagonists of History (and this story). The marginalized Other is the only one who gets up and states the discourse of reason. Yet this transcendental moment is quickly interrupted by someone from the audience who demands: “Yo no voy al teatro para que me insulten, crees que no te entendemos negro...” (147).¹¹ Even though this person is part of the play, the immediate reaction from the audience in most performances is to quiet the “screamer.” This interruption, along with the reaction from the audience, allows for a moment of metatheatricity that underscores the artificial nature of all discourse. It also reminds the audience how we are all part of this game, since we are all consuming a work of art: the theatrical performance, which is also artificial by nature.¹²

In the performance, the arrival of Napoleon upon his horse on stage signals the final and total decadence of the previous order. The historical moment changes and, therefore, the legitimizing discourse changes. According to Valdés Kuri, the director, the arrival of Napoleon signals the triumph of reason. Napoleonic culture is what finishes with the *castrati* as an art form, so it is only appropriate that Napoleon enters the stage to mark this change. With the arrival of Napoleon, the characters onstage are able to separate into individual entities. The explosion of an onstage cannon separates the Siamese-twin brothers and makes Quirón lose his animal half. History and hegemonic discourse have definitively changed. At this moment, the performance revises the history of opera, which culminates with its more commercial and kitsch aspects: opera as mass consumption as represented by the Three Tenors (Plácido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, and José Carreras). In the play, this leads to total confusion onstage brought about by the arrival of popular music. In this scene, one can observe the thematic portrayal of the dominance of mass culture. The stage is engulfed in total chaos: constant interruptions, interaction with the audience, and the incorporation of popular music, all codes associated with mass culture and located outside the traditional concept of “theatre.” Therefore, thematically as well as visually one can perceive a change, since it is the end of an era and it is possible for the audience to feel a certain nostalgia upon perceiving these changes. The audience is extremely important in this stage of the performance, since this scene only works if the audience is able to identify the popular music and images that are presented onstage. In this way, both the audience and the characters onstage can declare themselves part of this mass culture, a commonality that unites them.

Finally, all that is left of the *castrati* is an old record with the voice of Alessandro Moreschi, the last *castrato*. These figures have been stripped of all symbolic value, so it is not surprising that all that is left of them is a record, a symbol of the mass distribution of art. The scene where the record is presented as a last relic of the *castrati* is interrupted by Ambroise Paré singing “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor, a song associated with the rise of disco music, which is also symbolic of total decadence. Jean Paré, infuriated, strangles his brother for singing this, yelling at him that “this is not *castrato*.” In other words, who is able to determine what is legitimate now, in the age of mass culture? In this way, the theatrical text is able to trace a progression in art and popularity, from mythical beings (Quirón, who at one time was the Parés’ favorite) to the artistically popular (the *castrati*) all the way to the commercially popular (the record and modern music).

Since these elements are recognizable, the audience moves closer and further from them in turn; in this movement, it recognizes the objects drawn from mass culture yet perceives how differently they are used in theatre. The attitude towards mass culture is thus not essentialized. Theatrical discourses do not seek to reject it entirely, nor do they incorporate elements from mass culture in a naive way. Instead, seduction and betrayal are at play. The formulaic, repetitive charm of mass culture appeals to the audience, as is only natural given the ubiquity of mass culture in daily life. However, in reappropriating these elements, the performance first delays the gratification of the audience and ultimately fails to deliver the promised comfort. The audience thus comes to recognize a difference between the performance that reformulated the familiar formula and the mass media from which it derived the material. The unease thereby created allows for a critical mobilization quite different from the passivity of consumption. This is of crucial pedagogical importance since it can happen where the performance is held, but also in the classroom, where students can be spectators or even participants.

Understanding the historical relationship between theatricalities and mass culture is a multidisciplinary undertaking. Our objective is to attend to and maintain present the voices, histories, and texts that question aesthetic, cultural, social, ideological, and political parameters. The inclusion of mass media in theatrical discourse shows a will to find new spaces for debate and to push the limits of what is considered legitimate; it reminds us that cultural legitimacy is not static. Theatrical performances can contest the hallowed place of art and open new borders from whence new canons can be debated. In the end, this exploration invites us to reflect critically on how cultural production contributes to processes of social construction. While they are not the only ones to do so, theatrical practices constitute a fundamental space for social and cultural questioning. Thus, this work is a useful tool for students to historicize the relationship between mass culture and art within a performance context and the historical periods of Latin America.

Dartmouth College

Notes

¹ At the same time, one recognizes that theatre, as is the case of art and literature, is an expression mediated by the particular view of the author, director, actor, etc. This particular mediation is related to a particular view, to its place of enunciation, and to the circumstances in which that view takes shape. It

is in this sense that a theatrical performance gives us interpretive “keys,” but these keys correspond to a certain view or representation of reality rather than to reality itself.

² It is agreed that one of the first countries to adopt the neoliberal ideology was Chile during the Pinochet regime. As pointed out by several scholars, the neoliberal system was inserted into Chile through violence, torture, and genocide as a way to control the middle class economically. For more information see Hernández and Rizk.

³ All translations are my own.

⁴ I use the terms “theatricalities” or “theatrical discourses” to incorporate performances that lie outside the traditional, Aristotelian concept of theatre. By “theatricalities,” I mean non-hegemonic forms that have discourses resembling theatre but which would not fit within a traditional definition of “theatre.”

⁵ This topic can be taught and explored through an impossible-to-number list of plays and performances that provide wonderful insight into the workings on mass culture. Some examples are: *Edipo Asesor* by Benjamín Galemiri (Chile); *La historia de Ronald el payaso de McDonalds* by Rodrigo García and La Carnicería Teatro (Argentina/Spain); *Aura y las once mil vírgenes* by Carmen Boulosa (Mexico); *Misa en Los Pinos* by Jesusa Rodríguez (really, most plays by Jesusa are wonderful considerations of the interstices of mass culture and art in the era of neoliberalism) (Mexico); many performances by Astrid Hadad and her forays into cabaret culture (Mexico); *Exhivilización: perras en celo* by Katia Tirado (Mexico); *Hecho en Perú* by Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani (Peru); *Geraldas e avencas* by Primeiro Ato (Brazil); most of the works by Guillermo Gómez Peña and La Pocha Nostra; *Angelitos empantados* by Cristóbal Peláez González (Colombia); *El jardín de pulpos* by Aristides Vargas (Ecuador-Grupo Malayerba); and I could go on. For the purposes of this article, I’m focusing on one performance in order to provide a very close reading of a production, which will allow me to make an in-depth analysis of mass culture and artistic production.

⁶ For more information on the intricacies of this play and its production, see *De monstruos y prodigios, la historia de los castrati. Recuento de un proyecto teatral inclasificable*.

⁷ The subject and image of the *castrati* are already part of mass culture, having been explored in several media, including the feature film *Farinelli* (1994), directed by Gérard Corbiau, about the 13th-century *castrato* Carlo Maria Broschi.

⁸ AMBROISE: The art of these *virtuosi* consists of the extreme sophistication of beauty, visible in the vocal fireworks display as well as in the gripping exteriorization of *pathos*, given that these singers have a voice so...

JEAN: delicate...

AMBROISE: agile...

JEAN: tender...

AMBROISE: And potent, that they have no difficulty whatsoever in bringing the audience to tears.

⁹ AMBROISE: Opera impresarios used to complain of endless difficulties due to *castrati*’s demands

JEAN: While in France, the impresario is the one who rules...

¹⁰ AMBROISE: Jean, the opera is a celebration of epidermal pleasures. What value can...

JEAN: theories and reason...

AMBROISE: have before the happiness of the moment?

¹¹ “I don’t come to the theater to be insulted, what, do you think we don’t understand you, slave? [...]”

¹² Valdés Kuri points out that this interruption, which follows Sulaimán’s monologue, serves as a reminder of the Italian opera that existed at the time, since there was plenty of interaction between the audience and the actors onstage. With this interruption he seeks to remind the spectator what the theatrical experience used to be like by forcing him/her to participate and, therefore, creating a longing for a theatre where the audience was part of the events onstage, that is, where the “seduced” spectator is a participant of the play.

Works Cited

- Amar Sánchez, Ana María. *Juegos de seducción y traición: Literatura y cultura de masas*. Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2000.
- Eco, Umberto. *Apocalípticos e integrados*. 6th ed. Tusquets Editores, 2005.
- Hernández, Paola. *El teatro de Argentina y Chile: Globalización, resistencia y desencanto*. Corregidor, 2009.
- Kuri, Jorge, and Claudio Valdés Kuri. "De monstruos y prodigios. La historia de los castrati." *Gestos*, vol. 16, no. 31, 2001, pp. 111-56.
- Ossandón, Carlos B., and Eduardo A. Santa Cruz. *El estallido de las formas. Chile en los albores de la "cultura de masas."* LOM Ediciones, 2005.
- Perales, Rosalina. "El mundo al revés: inversión y carnavalización de la historia." *Discursos teatrales en los albores del siglo XXI*, edited by Juan Villegas, Alicia del Campo and Mario Rojas, Ediciones de *Gestos*, 2001, pp. 173-85.
- Proaño-Gómez, Lola. *Poéticas de la globalización en el teatro latinoamericano*. Ediciones de *Gestos*, 2007.
- Rizk, Beatriz. *Imaginando un continente: utopía, democracia y neoliberalismo en el teatro latinoamericano*. LATR Books, 2010.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. *Escenas de la vida posmoderna: intelectuales, arte y videocultura en la Argentina*. Seix Barral, 2004.
- Valdés Kuri, Claudio, Mario Espinoza, Analola Santana, and Astrid Velasco. *De monstruos y prodigios, la historia de los castrati. Recuento de un proyecto teatral inclasificable*. Tintable/Conaculta, 2014.