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### **Reseña/Review**

O. Hugo Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

## **Some Thoughts on Cultural Studies and Disciplinary Boundaries**

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*Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America* boasts a snazzy, but misleading, cover featuring lobby cards of Mexican “golden age” films with titles such as *Amor salvaje* and *La adúltera*. This ambitious book aims across disciplinary boundaries in linking classic melodramatic cinema with more contemporary genres of Latin American media culture including “Mexican narcodramas and South

American telenovelas” (1). Author O. Hugo Benavides is listed as “Associate Professor of Anthropology, Latin American and Latino Studies, and International Political Economy and Development,” a job title that points to the kind of professional schizophrenia into which current trends toward multidisciplinary have led many of us. This book, which essentially offers readings of various media texts (and, on occasion, literary texts and orally transmitted legends), is in fact not excessively interdisciplinary, even as it brings into the discussion a range of theoretical perspectives (including works by such diverse thinkers as James Baldwin, Michel Foucault, Jesús Martín Barbero, Stuart Hall, Néstor García Canclini, Frantz Fanon and Gloria Anzaldúa), although it does clearly chart new territory for Benavides, author of two previous books on Ecuador, *Making Ecuadorian Histories: Four Centuries of Defining Power* (2004) and *The Politics of Sentiment: Imagining and Remembering Guayaquil* (2006), both published by the University of Texas Press. *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas*’s primary field of focus is Latin American film and media studies, a field that does not count among the various fields in which Benavides’s expertise lies, at least according to his job title.

Cultural Studies, in many ways the contemporary academy’s predominant paradigm of interdisciplinarity—and indeed one whose intellectual project I support with great enthusiasm—encourages anthropologists and political scientists to engage in media criticism, historians to interrogate contemporary cultural objects, and experts in Ecuador to focus critical inquiry on Mexico and Colombia. The fact that Cultural Studies in the US nonetheless lurks mainly in the margins of traditional disciplines, none of which have been willing to incorporate rigorous training in the kind of interdisciplinary methodology good cultural studies work requires, has given Cultural Studies a bad reputation. Everyone does Cultural Studies, but practically no one has received formal and rigorous training in Cultural Studies. We have our degrees in Anthropology or Comparative Literature, and supplement our disciplinary training with independent readings of Raymond Williams or Néstor García

Canclini, but our formation in Cultural Studies tends to be somewhat improvised. It is time to recognize that Cultural Studies needs its own space, with graduate programs or course sequences dedicated to providing the training in Cultural Studies theory, methodology and in interdisciplinarity in general that will enable scholars to engage effectively in the kind of interdisciplinary work that today's students, academic publishers and inquiring minds in general demand.

Benavides's book proposes the sort of study that Cultural Studies should be producing, an inquiry that explores melodrama across time, space and media as Latin America's emblematic genre of cultural production, a popular genre that has exercised enormous influence in Latin American culture as well as in the external markets to which it exports its cultural products (e.g., its telenovelas, which are exported all over the world). His critical readings focus on issues of race, gender, sexuality, class and national/regional identity, among other themes, and are based upon "fierce participant observation and textual analysis" (4).

In the first half of the book, he offers adept and often incisive readings of such telenovelas as the Brazilian hit *Xica da Silva* (1996), and *Adrián está de visita* (2001), *Pasión de gavilanes* (2003) and the blockbuster *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (1999), all Colombian productions. These analyses, which point to the importance of a much maligned but incredibly popular genre that has become Latin America's most globally influential cultural product ever, are the strength of the book, and are worth a read. Benavides argues provocatively that the apparently one dimensional characters and reductive plots of telenovelas such as *Xica* mask a "much more complex and untidy" (44) interpretation of everyday reality that engages Latin American viewers not only as mere entertainment, but in a process of identification with tropes representing the multifaceted intricacies of everyday life in Latin America (which for Benavides sensibly includes the Latino United States) as well as "one of the central nerves of the continent's colonial legacy: desire" (44). For example, he interrogates the notion of ugliness in *Betty, la fea*, concluding that "[i]t is clear to all

viewers that *las feas* (Betty included) are not real people—nobody is that ugly or campy... At the same time, they, *las feas*, subtly exemplify a real identification with the majority of Latin Americans, who have considered themselves ugly from the moment they were born, or, more significant, have that image imposed on them by modernizing development projects of the powerful west” (57). The heroine Betty’s ultimate rise to beauty implies a postcolonial resignification of the term. The story is simple and apparently frivolous, but its underlying social messages are not lost on its Latin American viewers. The genre’s apparently trivial nature is precisely what allows it to address many of the issues that are most important to non-elite Latin Americans. Benavides’s readings of race and sexuality in *Adrián está de visita*, and of the symbolic role of popular music (*cumbia* and Tex-Mex genres) linking the culture of drug trafficking of Colombia and Mexico in *Pasión de gavilanes* are interesting, and further develop his thesis regarding the importance of telenovelas in contemporary Latin America (and beyond).

However, the connections Benavides draws between these telenovelas and Mexican golden age film and narco-dramas are not well drawn. He appears to be no more than an aficionado of Mexican golden age film, never once citing seminal works on Mexican cinematic melodrama by critics such as Carlos Monsiváis and Ana López, and committing factual errors that could have easily been avoided by consulting any Mexican film reference –not to mention Internet Movie Database: e.g., Benavides claims that the classic film *María Candelaria*, which debuted in early 1944 in Mexico and won its Palme d’Or in Cannes in 1946, was a “1950s commercial hit” (116) and also implies that film stars Dolores del Río, Anthony Quinn and Rita Hayworth were products of Mexico’s film boom (13), when in reality Del Río acted in 30 Hollywood films before she ever appeared in a Mexican movie, Quinn did not act in Mexican cinema at all prior to his appearance (with del Río) at age 63 in the Hollywood-Mexico coproduction (in English) of *Los hijos de Sánchez* in 1978, and New York born Hayworth (whose father was Spanish and mother Irish/English)

appeared in only one Mexican film (uncredited, as an extra, in *Cruz Diablo* en 1934) before becoming a Hollywood megastar.

More problematic is the unsettling fact that the second half of the book, which according to the introduction focuses on the Mexican narco-drama, a major genre of Mexico's low budget B-movie industry "[f]rom 1970 to 1995" (13), does not significantly treat even one concrete example of this category of Mexican film. Benavides instead presents a series of generalizations on the genre, which he follows not with analyses of the handful of Mexican B-movies with "suggestive titles" such as *Orquídea sangrienta*, *El hijo de Lamberto Quintana*, *La venganza del rojo*, *La cueva de los alacranes* and *Clave siete* that he mentions in passing (111-12), but with readings of several borderlands folk legends (Juan Soldado, Jesús Malverde), a Spanish novel set in the US Mexico borderlands (Arturo Pérez Reverte's *La reina del sur*) and its inspiration for a narco-corrido (Los Tigres del Norte's ballad of the same title), and a US produced Spanish language film (*tejano* Robert Rodríguez's *El mariachi*). The second half of the book really refers to a broad range of cultural production that treats drug trafficking in the US Mexico borderlands, works that are often more comfortably categorized as epic than melodramatic, and which, with the exception of the Juan Soldado and Malverde legends, may be less the product or reflection of Latin American cultural tastes than of more global cultural trends.

Thus, statements like "I am not arguing that there are no other culturally authentic social movements in Mexico or the rest of the continent—Chiapas and Mexican wrestling spring to mind—but that in its portrayal of the northern border region the narco-drama is one of the movements that has most successfully effected a transnational image within a greater landscape of global capital and immigrants on both sides of the border with the United States" (185) evoke little credibility, even if one can somehow imagine narco-dramas, the Zapatista rebellion and *lucha libre* as comparable "social movements." While there are some interesting analyses in the book's second half, including discussions of the problematic

reception of the Spanish novel *La reina del sur* in the Mexican borderlands in which it is set, and the parodic treatment of the Mexican narco-drama genre in the US produced *El mariachi*, the book's main arguments on melodrama as a long established form of popular resistance in Latin America (202-3) are ultimately not persuasive because of its inability to convincingly lay out the continuity it argues for between Mexican golden age film, 1970s-80s-90s narco-themed Mexican B-movies, and late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century Latin American telenovelas.

This project suggests a direction in which Latin American Cultural Studies needs to move. Certainly it is worthwhile to explore the cultural continuities of Latin American melodrama, for example through comparative studies of 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic novels, classic films, popular music (*boleros*, *rancheras*, etc.), *historietas*, B-movies of the 1970s and 80s, and contemporary telenovelas. An early example of this kind of study, albeit one that limits its focus to film alone, may be seen in an often cited article by Ana López from 1991 ("Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the 'Old' Mexican Cinema," reprinted in John King, et al, eds., *Mediating Two Worlds*, London: BFI, 1993, pp. 147-63) which attributes the popular success of neoliberal era Latin American film—citing the prominent example of Luis Carlos Puenzo's *la historia oficial* (1986)—to its return to melodrama (148-49).

Transnational studies exploring cultural influences and links among Latin American countries (e.g., Colombia and Mexico), or of Latin American cultural production (e.g., telenovelas) in their global dissemination and reception offer important areas of interdisciplinary research for a new generation of Cultural Studies scholars. However, working across time periods, genres of cultural production, and national contexts requires significant preparation that often takes the investigator beyond her areas of expertise. Those of us who already have PhDs in traditional disciplines have three options. The first two: 1) significant independently realized training outside our disciplines and areas of specialization; 2) a move toward collaborative projects in which we team

with scholars whose areas of expertise complement our own and serve to fill in the blanks in our knowledge, would make possible interrogations that take us outside the box of our disciplines and specialized training. This second option may be risky, as it is not the current paradigm in the humanities and social sciences, and may be viewed with suspicion by some of our colleagues; however, I believe that it will become increasingly common in the coming years. Our third option is to close our minds off to questions that take us beyond our training and remain captive to our disciplines.

At the same time, it is important that we (the contemporary academy) respond from our institutional contexts as well—whether or not we choose to engage personally in the interdisciplinary Cultural Studies style work—not by blaming Cultural Studies for the demise of academic rigor, but by retooling graduate studies and establishing institutional spaces for Cultural Studies either within our disciplines or as distinct standalone programs so as to enable the next generation of scholars to effectively carry out more ambitiously interdisciplinary and intellectually relevant studies on Latin American popular and media culture (as well as many other themes).

In synthesis, this study—along with other important studies of the Latin American telenovela industry by such scholars as Martín Barbero, Daniel Mato, Renato Ortiz, Nora Mazziotti, Jorge González, and Oscar Steimberg, among others—presents several interesting analyses of Latin American melodrama in telenovelas, and hints at ways in which this genre, which has become one of the most representative genres of Latin American culture to international audiences, might be seen in a broader context of Latin American cultural production and its popular reception.