

Chavo del Ocho: Sitcom neighborhood dynamics in Mexican television

El Chavo del Ocho: *la dinámica de la
vecindad en la comedia de situación
televisiva*

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This essay analyzes *El Chavo del Ocho*'s successful series (1971-1980). My argument is that this sitcom founded its television format on one of the most important social spaces in Mexico and Latin America: "La vecindad" or the neighborhood. Moreover, I analyze how the neighborhood dynamics contribute to represent a communal identity: each character portrays not only its specific version, but also of the collective, the conflicts, but above all, the solidarity of Mexico's in 1970s.

KEYWORDS: Television fiction, sitcom, *Chavo del Ocho*.

Este ensayo analiza la exitosa serie El Chavo del Ocho (1971-1980). Argumento que el programa, como comedia de situación, arraigó su formato televisivo en una matriz importante en México y América Latina: la vecindad. De manera concreta, analizo cómo las dinámicas de la vecindad contribuyen a una representación de la identidad comunal: cada personaje manifiesta no solo su versión específica, sino que también representan una versión de lo colectivo, lo conflictivo, pero sobre todo, lo solidario del México de los años setenta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ficción televisiva, comedia de situación, Chavo del Ocho.

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Despite the arborescent significance of the TV program *El Chavo del Ocho* (Televisión Independiente de México (1971-1972), and Televisa (1973-1980)² in Mexico and Latin America), its nature and implications have received little attention in the literature of communication and media studies. To some extent, this neglect is due to a division of labor by how the television format is approached in academia, on the one hand, and the so-called “evil eye of the intellectuals” (Martín-Barbero, 1997, p.11) on the other. This is likely because communication and media scholars have been content with analyzing telenovelas. In a way, I argue that this neglect is a consequence of the communication field that concerns many researchers in Latin America, related to the importance and centrality of the telenovela as a product of widespread circulation and with a fundamental role in contemporary culture.

It's the writings of Jesús Martín-Barbero (1988), Jorge González (1998), Nora Mazzioti (1996), Immacolata Vasallo de Lopes (2004), and Guillermo Orozco (2006) among others whom, in many ways, have set the tone for debates on the genres of the television industry in Latin America. Of course, the legacy of these and other television researchers strongly represent a reference point. As commentators of the transformations that accompanied the development of the television industry, these academics turned their attention to a series of sociocultural phenomena and agreed that the telenovela resides a cultural matrix from which “its narrative force and from where it is possible that this programmatic genre emotionally and cognitively call for their audiences” (Orozco, 2006, p. 14).

² *El Chavo del Ocho* emerges at a critical moment in Mexican television. Produced initially by Televisión Independiente de México (TIM) Channel 8, from 1972 to 1973 during its fight for rating against Mexican Telesistema (TSM). In 1973, TSM took over TIM to create Televisa. Grupo Televisa concentrated four channels, operated as a “de facto” monopoly from 1973 to 1993 and played a central role in the incorporation of Mexicans to the demands of a consumer society (Gómez, 2017). It was broadcast in Latin America, Europe, and Asia, also dubbed into more than 50 languages. The program supported the consolidation of Prime Time (Edgerton, 2007); according to Friedich and Colmenares (2017), in the seventies, the audience was 350 million per episode in Latin America.

Some intellectuals certainly criticized television; in fact, Carlos Monsiváis (1978) is among the first intellectuals who crystallized the conception of *El Chavo del Ocho* as that gag humor (“ñoño”) and puerile on a television without options:

The series sustains itself on a single gag: the adult who dresses and speaks like a child. The public accepts the series because of the sagacity (voluntary and involuntary) of the industry of consciousness and, for that, converts humor into profits (paragraph 20).

I agree with Jesús Martín-Barbero (1997) in the sense of considering television as an essential object of the contemporary social sciences and, in particular, of the studies of culture. Thus, apparently, those days are behind when researchers had to justify writing about television, especially about sitcoms (González-Hernández, 2007).³

Firstly, this essay will address the concept of television genre as the origin of a “type” of text in a broad sense (Feuer, 1992). However, I will analyze the specific “format” of the sitcom and the way it is structured in the Mexican case; since the notion of the sitcom has been extended, reformulated and reconstructed in different moments and nations (Lacalle, 2001) in the context of the entertainment industry (Marc, 2016).

One of the key arguments that this text tries to convey is that *El Chavo del Ocho* program, as a sitcom, took root in its format and industrial production in an essential cultural matrix in Mexico and Latin America: the neighborhood.

If sitcoms in the United States and Europe considered the family (nuclear, extended, integrated and created) as the heart of the sitcom format in its early days (Kutulas, 2016): a format that extended itself to workspaces (Mary Tyler Moore, CBS 1970-1977), to bars (Cheers,

³ However, I believe that part of the work that television scholars’ face today is to sift and continue the contributions. Then, when confronting other program genres we do not start from a “clean slate”: in Mexico and Latin America, we could approach their fiction productions such as situation comedies, game shows, talk shows, magazines, cartoons, etcetera.

NBC 1982-1993) and to coffee shops (Friends, NBC 1994-2004), then in Mexico, the heart of the sitcom in its beginnings was the “neighborhood”. As that space between the domestic and the merely public, where the expression of individual and collective imaginaries is put in motion; the recognition of social beliefs and expectations, and the cultural re-creation of social class, childhood, humor, gender, solidarity, and daily conflict.

An important and recent aspect is that some authors from the United States and Latin America have been interested in writing about *El Chavo del Ocho*. In a compiled work (Friedrich & Colmenares, 2017) the phenomenon of *El Chavo* is analyzed from its representation on school and childhood, the Latin American aspect, and the way poverty and cynicism are romanticized against the economic structures and inequalities, makes of *El Chavo* a “transgressive and unique show” in Latin America.⁴

The aspects developed in this writing differ from the approach previously mentioned, since my interest in this iconic series attempts to bring the importance to the narrating techniques of a past Mexican society into the light. From a television that is not “an art, it is a craft; TV does not have authors or artists, filmmakers and artisans make it” (Rincón, 2006, p.170). *El Chavo del Ocho* and his TV characters friends lead us to different representations of the urban and poor neighborhood of Mexico City. More concretely, I analyze how the dynamics of the “vecindad” contribute to the development of a communal identity: each character represents not only its specific version (the characters became recognizable brands by themselves), but also represents a version of the collective.

⁴ For these authors, *El Chavo del Ocho* is located in the discourses and narratives of the Latin American “brotherhood” of the seventies. As a way to counteract the binaries of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and as a way of accounting for the processes of accelerated modernization that left many sectors of the Mexican population homeless and in migrant status.

THE TV GENRE AS A CULTURAL CATEGORY

When I use the term “television genre” as a starting point, I turn to a theory by Jason Mittell in *Genre and Television* (2004). Mittell argues that part of the reason why the concept of television genre is so open and has so many different uses and nuances of meaning is because it is used as a body of tool by fans, vendors, producers, journalists, and academics. For Mittell, the factor that inhibits the analysis of the nature of the television genre results from the strong dependence that is applied to literary and film theory in general, and the limits of assumptions and textual analysis, in particular.

This implies the attempt to approach the television genre beyond the text and to do so as a complex interrelation “between texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts. Genres transcend the boundaries between text and context, production, distribution, promotion, exhibition, criticism, and reception practices” (Mittell, 2004, p.10). Equipped with this conception, Mittell echoes the most influential discussion on the television genre theory developed by Jane Feuer (1992), who argues that gender analysis, as a paradigm, does not operate sufficiently for television as it does for the film and literature.⁵

To a certain extent, Feuer’s argument is similar to the consensus of Latin American authors that analyzed telenovelas and its audiences: part of the process of making sense and experiencing pleasure involves the relationship of the television text with others. But what Feuer (1992) does is reflect on the sitcom as a format; that is, as a way of relating the industrial television practice (the need to regularly produce programs

⁵ This line of reasoning organizes three labels to summarize existing approaches to genres: aesthetics, ritual, and ideology. The aesthetic approach focuses on the understanding of gender in relation to artistic expression and the role of the author; the ritual approach sees gender as “an exchange between industry and the public, an exchange where culture speaks to itself” (Feuer, 1992, p.145), similar to the notion of “cultural forum” proposed by Newcomb and Hirsch. Finally, the ideological approach that considers gender as an instrument of control that reproduces the dominant ideology of a capitalist system.

that appeal to millions of viewers) with the texts that are produced as a result of this process depending on the expectations of the audiences. In the midst of comprehending what the most basic and well-known format of television is, she argues that the most salient sitcom characteristics can be identified “the half-hour format, the basis in humor, the ‘problem of the week’ that causes hilarious situations that can be solved so that new episodes can take place next week” (Feuer, 1992, p.146).

EL CHAVO DEL OCHO AS A “MEXICANIZED SITCOM”

The description of the main characteristics of the comedy television genre, but more concretely of the sitcom (as the format that this genre involves), serves as a backdrop against which I want to consider some of the ways in which Roberto Gómez Bolaños, more commonly known as Chespirito, appropriated and reformulated the format to make a comic series “a la” Mexican. In this section, I address how the production of *El Chavo del Ocho* recreated the comedic format of a Mexican television program.⁶ I argue that we should not consider this series production as a mere complement to other foreign sitcoms broadcast on different channels of Mexican television during that time, dubbed in Spanish: *Adams Family*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *I love Lucy*, etcetera. On the contrary, the program development during those years in a network such as Televisa, still has an impact on how the producers contemplate humorous television (Vecinos, 2005-2010; María de Todos Ángeles, 2009-2014), and, above all, their interpretive community.⁷ By paying more attention to these comedy programs, we can distinguish the origin of the subsequent adaptation of the television format of this “Mexicanized” sitcom. I will briefly limit myself to three legacies

⁶ Rincón (2006) sees the format as the unit of television creation, elaborated within a logic of entertainment; this “refers to the way in which the various narrative and industrial elements are assembled” (p.186).

⁷ When the formats change, the audience plays a role. However, the “construction of an interpretive community of a television company” is more critical (Feuer, 1992, p. 152).

that I consider the most influential: the picaresque novel, the Mexican cinema, and the Hollywood cinema.

In “From the picaresque novel to *El Chavo del 8*,” Carlos Aguasaco (2017) highlights the emergence of a subjective and individual epic, where the protagonist’s particular voice often questions the dominant discourses or rejects social impositions while seeking ways to avoid them.⁸

Aguasaco (2017) analyzes four works⁹ of the picaresque novel concerning *El Chavo del Ocho*, where he identifies “a variety of common themes such as childhood, school, and poverty in the city, child labor and social structures” (p. 82). This comparison raises aspects that remain valid in the television program: children represented in abusive situations and servitude. The school experience parodied by Professor Jirafales’ teaching difficulty; the poverty of the orphan child, devoid of surname and of proletarian origin that belongs to the generation from which the identity of the “peladito” of Cantinflas descends, and the criticism of the institutions, but without an open condemnation.

Of course, humorous television in Mexico has a true heritage with Mexican cinema (García Riera, 1993; Monsiváis, 1978; Peredo, 2015). Television adapted the genre conserving the Greek heritage present in the Mexican variety theatres, the cabaret and the marquee “based on the dialogues and the ingenuity of the discursive construction, for jokes, gags, prose or rhymes” (Peredo, 2015, p. 34), of which Cantinflas is the main representative and comic spokesperson for “the lower class” (García Riera, 1993). Television comedy shows like *El Show del Loco Valdés* (1972-1974) or *El Show de Alejandro Suárez* (1972), addressed

⁸ Aguasaco (2017) observes that although the first appearance of the picaresque novel dates from the Sixteenth Century, it assumed new ways of representing the consolidation of urban societies in Europe and Latin America in the context of a rapidly developing capitalist economy and the establishment of a state bourgeois constitutional.

⁹ The four works analyzed by Carlos Aguasaco (2017) are *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversities* (1554), *El Buscón* (1626), *The Mangy Parrot: The Life and Times of Periquillo Sarniento* (1819), and *The futile life of Pito Pérez* (1938).

the classic themes of survival, passion for football, sex, and corruption. Monsiváis (1978) summarizes television's "new urban humor" in the following way:

From the cinema, in the matter of comedy, Mexican television inherits: a) impositions of the alliance between censorship (State) and society (Church and family): gag humor (childish), exile of word play and any sexualization of speech ... d) technical deficiencies: cumulative sketches that hide the absence of a structure, non-existence of satire and reduction of parody (paragraph 1).

Thus, *El Chavo del Ocho* inherits three decades of cinema sketch tradition and gag humor but ignores the questioning or political witticism: "No mockery of the gods of Olympus" (Toussaint, 1985, p. 44). Other programs of the television industry reflected a humor "suitable for all families" such as *La Criada Bien Criada* (1969-1980), or the same sketches *En Familia con Chabelo* (1968-2015). For Monsiváis (1978), it is the inheritance of Mario Moreno "Cantinflas", Germán Valdés "Tin Tán", Antonio Espino "Clavillazo", Adalberto Martínez "Resortes". The same style of humor induces Roberto Gómez Bolaños to make scripts¹⁰ for Xavier López "Chabelo", Gaspar Henaine "Capulina", and Marco Antonio Campos "Viruta".

Other legacies such as the Hollywood comedies of Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, and Charles Chaplin, with the vaudeville tradition, the music hall, and pantomime, are perfect examples of how "the cinema had originated staging based on the persecutions, pies smashed in the

¹⁰ Between 1957 and 1970, Gómez Bolaños worked as a screenwriter and scriptwriter in 37 films, as well as a writer for television programs such as *Cómicos y Canciones* (1956-1967) and *El Estudio de Pedro Vargas* (1959). His nickname "Chespirito" has its origin in his first film, *Los Legionarios* (1957), starring Viruta and Capulina. "The director was Agustín P. Delgado (Note: he was a brother of Miguel M. Delgado, Cantinflas' movie director), and he loved the script. He told me: 'You are like a little Shakespeare.' It was a huge compliment, and he started to tell me 'Shakespearito' as the diminutive of William Shakespeare" (Gómez Bolaños, 2012, p.85).

face, hits, falls, etc.” (Peredo, 2015, p.35), a style of humor appropriated by Miguel Delgado, director of several *Cantinflas* films.

Chespirito himself recognized Chaplin and *Cantinflas* as two of his great influences. Around 1971, when Roberto Gómez Bolaños produced *El Chavo del Ocho*, he had already spent years writing scripts for radio and had made skits of *El Chapulín Colorado* on channel 8. In the sixties, he worked for the advertising agency D’Arcy, and hired on TV under the sponsorship of Chiclets Adams. By then, he already had a good idea of the possibilities of the television format and its entertainment logic.¹¹

According to Chespirito, *El Chavo del Ocho* was the result of a “loose” sketch, because “it had no temporal thematic continuity”. The sketch was about a poor boy “who was walking in a public park and had a brief altercation with a balloon salesman”. As a result of this “loose” sketch, he began to shape the character with the name of Chavo: an extremely poor orphan boy, approximately eight years old, with an empty stomach and motivated by eating a *torta de jamón*, and always with good intentions: “the best example of the innocence and ingenuity of a child” (Gómez Bolaños, 2006, p. 98). Since Chavo is an orphan but does not live in an orphanage, his “natural” place is a neighborhood, which allows a specific type of interaction with other children and adults, or families –somewhat atypical– of the housing complex.

La Chilindrina is the most mischievous character in “la vecindad”; Chespirito designed her toothless due to its “hyperactivity that induces her to take risks” (p.100), naively in love with Chavo, and wearing glasses as a sign of intelligence and cunning to deceive the other children. Chilindrina is the daughter of Don Ramón, an underemployed widower known for being one of those rogue characters “who conceal their many inadequacies behind a screen of overwhelming sympathy.

¹¹ Gómez Bolaños, *Sin Querer Queriendo* (2006): “Well, radio and television were two different things. Shortly after, I started on Channel 2 [Televisa] the program that would become famous: *Cómicos y Canciones Adams*. It was not my first experience as a screenwriter on TV because previously I had written five comic routines for Manolín and Shilinsky ... there I had realized the fundamental difference between radio and television: action, as a complement to dialogue, but with priority over it” (p 55).

He was lazy, uneducated, wild, etc.” (p. 99). In the series, this character uses his ingenuity to escape the owner of the neighborhood, Mr. Barriga, because he always lacked the money to pay the modest apartment rent.

Quico, another character, serves as Chavo’s counterpart: “By saying counterpart I mean the fact that such a child would be rich (compared to Chavo), capricious, stubborn, spoiled, envious, etc.” (p. 102). To justify Quico’s character, Chespirito designed Doña Florinda, a mother who endorses and consents disproportionately to the behavior of her son. The character of Doña Florinda struggles to recover the remnants of middle-class life by giving toys to Quico, who presumes them with the other children, and who covers the fact that they want to leave the neighborhood one day: “Let’s go, Quico! Do not socialize with that mob”. Doña Florinda lives in love with the only character with cultural capital in the series: Professor Jirafales. This character is the elementary school teacher who suffers the pranks of children, but “always ends up supporting them with the kindness and stoicism that characterized those authentic apostles of teaching” (p. 99). Besides, his “old-fashioned” romance with Dona Florinda keeps him close to the “vecindad”.

The owner of the neighborhood, Mr. Barriga, embodies the owner who regularly comes to collect the rent of the inhabitants. This obese character represents the wealthy and unfortunate:

Victim of the mischief of neighborhood children ... Obviously, his anger was shaping the predicament that everyone had of him as a grumpy character, until the public discovered that behind that appearance there was a man who spread kindness, tenderness and, above all, indulgence (pp. 102-103).

His son, Noño, the boy with the most economic capital, played and endured the shenanigans of the other children without “despicable prejudices” (p.103) about the social class of his friends.

The last character of the cast is Doña Clotilde or “The Witch of the 71”, nicknamed by the children. This character represented the “prudish spinster ... [Who] sighed of love for the sympathetic Don Ramón” (p.103); object of numerous jokes about his age.

If, as Omar Rincón (2006) argues, that television is narrated by updated universal moral “archetypes,” then, a feature of Chespirito’s

characters is that they tend to be noble in the struggle between good and evil. In this sense, Rincón (2006) follows Casetti on the notions of archetypes: “The archetype of the struggle between good and evil tells us that the conflict between human beings is inevitable and that it has moral roots” (p. 183). In *Chavo del Ocho*, the characters, besides being noble, show flaws or traits of failure in their personality. Don Ramón, for example, does his best not to find work and avoids the responsibilities of paying the rent at all costs, but he takes care of and feeds Chavo. Doña Florinda “spoils” Quico, but sympathizes with the neighbors for the good of “la vecindad”.¹²

In the previous paragraphs, I only mentioned some of the key dimensions that constitute what I have described as the “Mexicanized sitcom” created by Chespirito in a format whose protagonist is distributed among the different characters (an innovation for television entertainment) determined by a collective and urban space: “la vecindad”. In the remainder of this section, I want to concentrate on these dimensions.

The first aspect of the situation comedy refers to its temporary dilation: the fixed duration of the format is half an hour. The format usually consists of 22 minutes with two commercial breaks (Feuer, 1992; Mittell, 2004). This way three blocks of 7 to 8 minutes approximately are created, with two or three scenes in each of them. Of course, these elements are similar to the *El Chavo del Ocho* program. *El Chavo* began its production as a “loose” sketch or segment within the comic program *Chespirito* (TIM, channel 8, 1970-1973 and Televisa, channel 2, 1980-1995) and later became a unitary entertainment program in TSM or Televisa in 1973-1980. In TV, the “dramatic” element of the sketch extended its narrative in order to postpone as much as possible the dramatic solution in the story (Rincón, 2006). In *El Chavo del Ocho*’s case, its production and transmission of 13

¹² *The Chapulin Colorado*, for example, created months before, was a parody of American superheroes and represents a sense of nobility “More agile than a turtle, nobler than a lettuce ... his shield is a heart!” Usually Chapulín was rescued by the same victims he wanted to save (Friedrich & Colmenares, 2017, p. 3).

minutes were extended (where it was combined with other sketches such as *El Chapulín Colorado*, *Los Caquitos* and *El Doctor Chapatín*), lasting 26 minutes and consisting of one chapter per week.

The format of the sitcom expands the action in a half-hour program and fragments the content based on humor. This is mainly because each scene has an action gag (comic effect or funny observation) or dialogue, a fun point that provokes laughter instantly. A gag runs every 30 seconds or less, usually leaving the narration suspended just after the joke so that the viewer does not lose the thread (Padilla & Requijo, 2010). However, sitcoms are more than just a succession of gags or sketches united and lengthened. There is a dramatic structure based on conflicts between the characters and the situations they provoke. The fact that *El Chavo del Ocho* reiterates expressions and positions in its format implies the use of a running gag or recurring gag. That is, a comic resource that Chespirito as a scriptwriter repeatedly included in situations that ended in: ¡Eso, eso, eso! (That, that, that!) ¡Es que no me tienen paciencia! (You guys aren't patient with me!) ¡Chusma, chusma! (Mob, mob!).

Almost a trademark for each character. “If you get them to work well, they tend to be very successful and loyal to the viewer, who is waiting to hear your favorite phrase, or who makes your character that funny gesture” (López cited in Padilla & Requijo, 2010, p. 198).

What we commonly consider a sitcom is the situation or the problem of the week (Feuer, 1992; Lacalle, 2001; Marc, 2016; Mittell, 2004), an aspect defined as the specific modality of having a beginning and an ending, a kind of autonomy per episode: usually the conflict that arises solves in the half hour of the program. This structure of the format makes the behavior of the characters predictable in different situations: although the situation is immutable, the grace continues. For Jane Feuer (1992), the “problem of the week” does not imply denying the change in the characters and the situation comedies in general. However, in the case of *El Chavo del Ocho*, the rigid structure of the television format is very apparent; usually, the situation develops “relieving” the complication and confusion with the support of human misunderstandings.

A *laught track* is a sound resource of the sitcom that simulates laughter from the public. The object is to simulate reactions of the audience, which is made to believe “they are present” in the location, before the gags or dialogues that mark the comic moment of the program. Laugh tracks their reasons for being in the entertainment logic of the media industries that use strategies to produce seduction and affection - discovered thanks to the contagious effect of environmental laughter in the audiences. The use of laughter tracks in *El Chavo del Ocho* program was intermittent although, used in the show during the seventies.¹³

THE DYNAMICS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD IN *EL CHAVO DEL OCHO*

When considering some of the sitcom dimensions in *El Chavo del Ocho*, I have suggested several aspects where the particular format of Gómez Bolaños’ production is comparable. To analyze in comparison with other sitcoms -and therefore the adaptation of *El Chavo del Ocho* as a TV format-, I will examine this reformulation in detail, including the elements that represented “la vecindad”. Indeed, a vital piece of the popularity of *El Chavo* was his memorable characters. However, when considering the notion of the “neighborhood” of *El Chavo del Ocho*, the programs’ interpellation meaning transcends beyond the humor.

The notion of the “vecindad” provides a backdrop against which we can consider urban life in Mexico City during the decades from 1930 to 1980. Although of prehispanic and colonial heritage, the reason why the “vecindad” has relevance in the urban life of the twentieth century is that it is linked to the most common and accessible housing for the majority of the population in a context of rapid industrialization and population growth. The idea of the “vecindad” supposes a community space within other housing alternatives such as multi-family buildings. However,

¹³ There are many web pages on the Internet organized by fans that include, among other things, a list of episodes, a guide to understanding *El Chavo del Ocho*, and forums where people discuss the inclusion of laugh tracks. As a note, it is until 1982 when an announcement appears of each sketch of the program Chespirito that said, “For a matter of respect to the public this program does not contain laughter tracks”.

this assumption is associated with poor, underdeveloped, unhealthy, and degraded housing (Quiroz, 2013). An example of this is Oscar Lewis's ethnographic work, *The Children of Sánchez* (1965), which describes the daily life of a Mexican family living in a neighborhood in Mexico City in the 1950s where poverty, domestic violence, and machismo are fundamental aspects of spatial identity.

In these neighborhoods, the coexistence between families was part of everyday life, children playing in the shared patio and women usually in the washhouse. If we consider the neighborhood as one of those community spaces generating collective, ideological cohesion, and creation of joint identifications of its inhabitants around the physical area that responds to the social condition of its individuals and the crossing of values (Hernández, 2013), then we can observe the function of the central patio as a place of coexistence and daily activities.

Although Carlos Monsiváis (1978) critical review, still with a tone of "high culture" on the "Comics and the television," does not offer a detailed analysis of the contents of such television formats, it represents a valuable contribution, whose scrutiny addresses the neighborhood on television, which commercializes:

The collective life of Mexicans ("Regrettable" example: *Los Beverly de Peralvillo*). The community is perfect in its required density: a microcosm of the modern existence where the exotic (agglomerated poverty) is dramatized and the folkloric (language and lower classes situations) is consecrated (par 22).¹⁴

I believe that these elements, among others, are those that are visible as emotional and cognitive interpellation devices for audiences. Martín-

¹⁴ In the criticism of Monsiváis (1978): "the poor observe and celebrate their class deformations, protected by geographic principles of identity: the neighborhood, the community, the big city. *El Chavo del Ocho* is a creature of the suburb but without tears, without nationalisms that overload him with identity (if he already has with the neighborhood, do not add the nation) and with a paradigmatic context of radio comedians of the thirties: Don Ramón, Doña Florinda, Quico, Chilindrino, Professor Jirafales" (paragraph 22).

Barbero (1988) suggests that this interpellation, in what refers to telenovelas, has to do with cultural matrices: “What if what constitutes the popular” hook “of telenovelas was not only the attachment to a format industrial but the fidelity of cultural memory?” (p 137). In this sense, it is that memory and reference of the “vecindad” that is activated thanks to a functional narrative that makes “complicity with the collective imagination” possible. The memory of the neighborhood in *El Chavo del Ocho* is portrayed in a physical or scenography way: it is rectangular and has two “stiff” floors. In the lower part, towards the side end corners, the houses form a type of horseshoe, which is the space of the physical structure where a large central courtyard is located, occupied by a washhouse and different items such as gas tanks, boxes, and plants. Both the homes of Doña Florinda, as well as those of Doña Clotilde and Don Ramón have large windows, which are open and remain visible towards the interior of modest homes.

At the heart of this television neighborhood, there is a clear articulation of roles and responsibilities. A subtle line of authority that flows from a homemaker with a strong temper and an unemployed widower, even to obedient but playful children. The neighborhood of *El Chavo del Ocho* represents an ideal conviviality rather than a social norm, a model that sometimes overcomes conflicts, slaps, and individual constrictions: affectively we can't escape this feeling of wanting to belong to that community. With this note on the neighborhood, we can continue considering two aspects of the neighborhood dynamics of *El Chavo* that prevail over 194 episodes, broadcasted between 1973 and 1980: a) solidarity and search for the common good; and b) conflicts of a day to day life. There are other aspects such as the relationship between children and adults, or the dynamics between new and old tenants, but their analysis would be minimal for reasons of space. Situations such as “neighborhood festivities”, “support between neighbors” and “neighborhood care”, represent some of the features of solidarity and coexistence modalities. Several episodes¹⁵ portray the festivities of

¹⁵ There are four versions of “Fiesta de la Buena Vecindad” or “The Festivities of the goodwill vecindad” that were recorded and re-recorded throughout the series (first version, transmitted April 16, 1972). In Blim (the streaming

the “good neighborhood”, Christmas’ posadas and birthdays. In the episodes dedicated to the “Fiesta de la Buena Vecindad” (April 16, 1972, and October 18, 1976) the group decides to hold a party where each of the neighbors presents a number (display of their talent) to the assistants. In the episode “La tarima” or “The wooden platform” (Gómez Bolaños, 1976), Don Ramón builds a wooden platform in the central patio, in front of his house.

One of the situations displays at the beginning of the episode when Doña Florinda notices the noise and “hustle and bustle of the mob”. She nags to Don Ramón: “The last thing I needed! ... Obstructing the passageway of people with this crap”. Don Ramón, answers appealing to the ultimate sacrifice of carrying on for the good of the neighborhood: “The children are going to sing, they are going to recite. Moreover, we have even thought about putting on a play”. This is the dialogue interchange that proceeded:

Doña Florinda: Well, you should have told me about the project.

Don Ramón: Well, yes, plus, we even thought that you would do an artistic number ... Like the circus fair. You know, they exhibit freaks. Right? Like the “spider woman”, the “bearded lady”. (Recorded Laughs)

Doña Florinda: (Slaps Don Ramón)

Don Ramón: “The bionic woman”. (Recorded Laughs)

Doña Florinda: I’ll tell you this. Over my dead body! Don’t even think for a second you are going to go through with this festival!

We might think that with this interchange, Doña Florinda boycotts the festival, but during the episodes, she changes her mind and participates with a zarzuela (Spanish light opera) with Professor Jirafales. Nevertheless, Doña Florinda occupies a dominant position in the neighborhood, associated with the typical strategy of social class

entertainment company belonging to Televisa, the provider of the 194 episodes catalog of *El Chavo del Ocho*) can be consulted with the title of “Party and Poetry.” The version most seen on Youtube.com (more than 20 million) is the production of four episodes initially broadcast from October 18 to November 8, 1976.

differentiation. Don Ramón, in his subordinate position, represents that “rabble” that makes noise, dirties the neighborhood and disrupts daily life. Thus, at the end of the episodes (and after several insults and slaps in the face) Doña Florinda is somewhat condescending in the face of the warm and laughter of mutual coexistence.¹⁶ A variant of good coexistence is the “support among neighbors” and Chavo’s caregiving. In the episodes on “The sleepwalkers or chocarreros spirits” (transmitted on February 4 and 11, 1974, respectively),¹⁷ Don Ramón is a sleepwalker, and during the night places dishes in the barrel where El Chavo supposedly sleeps. The cause of his sleepwalking disorder results from his concern for El Chavo, who sleeps on an empty stomach. Once he places a plate in the barrel (with food in his apparent dream), Don Ramón returns to his bed relieved by his action. The situation repeats itself several times, and everyone believes, especially Doña Clotilde, that the case relies upon the “chocarreros” or impolite spirits. In the second episode, Doña Clotilde convinces Doña Florinda to help Don Ramón get rid of the spirits by conducting a *séance* at Don Ramón’s house. In the final scene, the confusion is solved or alleviated; there are no such spirits and laughter have priority over explanation.

To appreciate this significance, we must consider that confusions result from in-jokes and, therefore, in “comprehension tests” (Thompson, 1998, p. 431): they present to the audience the proof of understanding jokes quickly. The jokes are evident in this confusion of Don Ramón, but at the same time, it provides an intertextual base to think solidarity in poverty. We know that Don Ramón is a migrant from Chihuahua and represents this older generation (for the children of the neighborhood is an “old Marimba” or “Aztec Mummy”), raised from

¹⁶ In the last scene, the whole neighborhood laughs and applauds at the awkwardness of Mr. Barriga, who after threatening to cancel the festivities, stains his entire body of paint by putting the hat on his head without perceiving what it contained. After a collective laugh, he smiles so he does not take himself too seriously.

¹⁷ On Blim streaming platform, you can find them as “Flying Saucers” (Gómez Bolaños, 1974a) and “Sleepwalking Vecindad” (Gómez Bolaños, 1974b). On Youtube.com, these episodes have more than 12 million views.

privations and sacrifices between different trades of underemployment: a rag-and-bone man, shoemaker, balloon seller, carpenter, milkman, plumber, etcetera. Even so, he has parental authority, and is strict with Chilindrina, he is always at home being a parent. And, in these circumstances of an atypical family on television, he plays a supporting role for Chavo. Solidarity and general well-being are also presented with the maintenance and care of the neighborhood infrastructure. A series of episodes on which it would be interesting to stop, due to the open portrayal of the roles in civic engagement, is represented in “Pintando la vecindad 1 y 2” (October 17 and 24, 1977, respectively) (Gómez Bolaños, 1977). The neighborhood is remarkably deteriorated, and after several problems, the characters of *El Chavo del Ocho* come together to paint it.

In the first scenes, Quico, El Chavo, and La Chilindrina play in the courtyard of the neighborhood “making clay figures”. Doña Florinda, seeing the muddy space, addresses the children: “Just look how messy you made the patio, the walls, and the doors!” Quico, her son, responds: “No mom, the thing is that the neighborhood is older than La Bruja del 71” (while Doña Clotilde enters the scene). After insults, disrespect, accusations, and excuses Doña Florinda and Doña Clotilde agree that the neighborhood needs an upgrade, even if the children clean the “mess they left.” Then they demand Mr. Barriga to “fix” the neighborhood, but he denies any improvement until Don Ramón pays the rent. The neighbors deliberate on how to resolve the situation, but it is Professor Jirafales who proposes that Don Ramón paint the neighborhood in exchange for a payment that will serve as a rental fee. In the final scene, Don Ramón is seen sitting in the central patio preparing the color paint and the interchange is somewhat in pattern-employed tone:

Mr. Barriga: By the way, do you think you can paint the whole neighborhood without anyone’s help?

Don Ramón: No sir, don’t you know that union makes us stronger? (Looking towards the camera) Here everyone is going to cooperate!

In several straight cuts and music, we see everyone in the neighborhood, including Mr. Barriga, painting the *vecindad*. Doña

Florinda approves: “The neighborhood looks prettier”, and Chilindrina adds: “But thanks to all of us cooperating”. Now, while the cooperation of the neighbors is exalted or valued, we must not forget that the representation that is made of the neighbors is childish: between insults and slaps they solve their problems (it may be that there lies the nobility of the characters of Chespirito), which is contradictory and somewhat disappointing. First of all, it is necessary to place what Carlos Monsiváis (1978) called “the perpetuators of a style suitable for children”. This repertoire of “province circus clowns who, with paper sticks and flour cakes in hand ... has its culmination in Roberto Gómez Bolaños” (paragraph 21). But there are also other readings that come close to audience perceptions. Internet sites and some television historians (for example, the series produced by Enrique Krauze, *Clio*) highlight the program and its influence on popular culture.

As it happened in many neighborhoods of Mexican society, the daily conflicts in the vicinity of *El Chavo del Ocho* were related to the collective and public use of the common spaces of the neighborhood: who occupies the neighborhood and for what? Usually the children’s games are the ones who unleash or make visible issues of gender, social class, age, and violence. Let us consider for a moment the most common conflicts in a neighborhood of the seventies: those that the children provoked when they played - the noise, the screams, the blows of balls at the doors, the breaking of windows or glass, and so on.

In the episode “The Firemen” (March 31, 1975) (Gómez Bolaños, 1975), Quico and El Chavo play the astronauts in the central courtyard, using the light switch to simulate the takeoff of the ship. This game irritates Don Ramón, who assumes that electricity or “light comes and goes,” which prevents him from ironing his clothes. Annoyed by the situation, he surprises Quico by manipulating the switch. In addition to calling him directly, he pinches him on the shoulder. Professor Jirafales who witnesses the scene, calls out the abuse. He takes Don Ramón’s shirt and exclaims: “Above all, you still dare to raise your hand, and in my presence!” When Doña Florinda listens to Quico’s cry, she leaves her home in a combative plan but changes her face as soon as she notices the presence of Professor Jirafales. Don Ramón escapes while the widow invites Professor Jirafales to his house for “a cup of coffee”.

With the playground “free” the children decide to play the firemen, then, they simulate that the neighborhood is on fire. Quico shouts: “Call the firemen!” Professor Jirafales and Doña Florinda believe, indeed, that the neighborhood burns in flames. The confusion unleashes a series of water hoses and blunders among the group. From the door of his house, Don Ramón mocks the “wet ones”. In the final scene, Don Ramón appears seated and tied to a chair, while Professor Jirafales pours water on his head with a hose: “Help, I’m drowning! Chilindrina, Chavo, do something!”

With its hoses and blows, the episode can be seen as a way for children to break into the tranquility of the neighborhood. Like other episodes, “The Firemen” operates narratively on the game’s imaginary: coexistence and enjoyment predominate along with a lack of respect and abuse (pinching, slapping, and knocks on the head with knuckles).

Another point to make has to do with the vigilant spirit of Professor Jirafales, who punishes Don Ramón for making fun of his blunders. Then we witnessed leaders of the neighborhood, with authoritarian characteristics, although without total control of the dynamics. But these situations, however, usually end in short-term conflicts between the inhabitants of the neighborhood, children, and adults: they do not transcend the episodes. The “Miss Universe Contest” (July 24, 1978) or “Feminist Chilindrina” (Gómez Bolaños, 1978) begins with Chilindrina’s desire to play baseball with Chavo and Quico in the neighborhood’s courtyard. Given the refusal of boys to include it in the game because: “Women do not play baseball,” Chilindrina replies:

How? Have you not heard about women’s liberation? Now women no longer have to ask permission from men to commit the barbarities that we used to when they did not give us permission.

In a later scene, Doña Florinda slapped Don Ramón with the approval of Chilindrina because “women should be together”. Don Ramón declares himself a misogynist, defines women, and therefore Chilindrina for comic effects as a “hindrance to man”. However, he changes his attitude when he remembers that day is the “Miss Universe” contest. Don Ramón reaches an agreement with Doña Florinda to watch

the television broadcast in his home. Men and women divide themselves in front of the television in their home.

On the one hand, Doña Florinda, Doña Clotilde, and Chilindrina are perplexed and somewhat jealous, at the immersion of Don Ramón, Quico, El Chavo, and Professor Jirafales, who admire the bodies of beauty pageant contestants. Much has been discussed about the “naturalized” place that women have in the television home, as a simple housewife (Bailey, 2004). But the discourse of women’s liberation of the 1970s has a resonance in Chilindrina, who does not want to be excluded from the games “for men”. However, the transmission of the contest on television works as a device that reinforces the strict gender roles of the characters. Men are separated from women to defuse the conflict and only watch TV, but even so, it is perceived that women assume a role of the flirtatious servant. In the final scene, and due to the jealousy towards the models, the women try to distract them from the television.

BEYOND THE SITCOM: TRANSMEDIA PHENOMENON

El Chavo del Ocho began broadcasting in Mexico on June 1971. As more Latin American television companies began to include it in their programming in the following years, the public expanded, and its commercialization intensified. By 1978, the program was a brand that included comics, toys, clothing and costumes, circus shows, commercial products, stadium presentations, records, etcetera. It is still difficult to assess the precise nature and extent of the impact. Regarding the amount of public, according to Nielsen Ibope (*El Financiero* editorial office, 2017), *El Chavo* has the most significant segments in the country still, with an average of 7.5 rating points that places it among the first 11 most-watched programs on channel 2 in Mexico. In the United States, the situation is similar to the Spanish-speaking market: *El Chavo del Ocho* has always been among the top ten over several decades (Koerner, 2005).

However, in recent years the television industry has engaged in a growth strategy to recover, maintain, and increase its public (*El Chavo Animado*, 2006-2014). Beyond the institutional changes that have

occurred on television, today it is interesting to observe the entire series of web pages, blogs, wiki-Chavo, fan clubs, discussion forums, tributes, and parody videos, which expand the narrative to limits without “suspect them from the beginning”, as Chapulín Colorado would say – another character created by Chespirito. Today we cannot leave behind these problems or necessarily treat them as superficial endeavors of the twentieth century. The bet is still premature.

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