

# TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT: THE POLITICAL *TELENOVELA* *EL CANDIDATO* AND THE 2000 MEXICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

---

IVAN ABARCA TORRES

## ABSTRACT

Explaining the 2000 Mexican presidential election through the *telenovela El Candidato* that aired in parallel and was based on the actual candidates and events is a cautionary account of how a fictional television series can influence a major national election. To understand how it could impact an election, one needs to go beyond seeing the series as purely entertainment. Instead, it needs to be examined from many perspectives, including media, sociology, political science, anthropology, history, etc. This paper analyzes how the *telenovela El Candidato* was intertwined with and could have interfered with a key recent political process, and how the television company that produced it also instrumentalized it for economical and political gain. To examine how view-

ers are influenced by the point of view of a media company that aired both the newscast and the *telenovela*, I developed a methodology I call cognitive-socio-pragmatics and applied it to the analysis of the 2000 presidential election and the *telenovela* titled *El Candidato*.

## KEYWORDS

Telenovelas; Mexican politics; Presidential Elections; reality versus fiction; *El Candidato*; mental spaces; *habitus*; embodied simulation hypothesis; connectors; projection.

*Exposure to electronic mass media has made contemporary democratic publics more aware that credible popular fictions have greater impact on shaping our political realities than do rational social choices or moral arguments.*

Yaron Ezrahi.

*Imagined Democracies. Necessary Political Fictions*

## INTRODUCTION

The 2000 Mexican presidential election was one of the most important elections in the history of Mexico, during which one of the most important Mexican political *telenovelas*, *El Candidato*, aired. The historic election marked the first time the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) [*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*] lost an election in seventy-one years (1929-2000).

The PRI, the longest running party to rule a government anywhere in the world, and its candidate for the 2000 election Francisco Labastida,<sup>1</sup> lost to Vicente Fox and his right-wing party (National Action Party - PAN) [*Partido de Accion Nacional*]. It also was the longest presidential campaign in Mexican history, beginning with Vicente Fox's election as governor of Guanajuato in 1997 when he began his campaign for President. The third candidate was Cuauhtémoc Cardenas<sup>2</sup>, the mayor of Mexico City and leader of the leftist party, the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) [*Partido de la Revolucion Democratica*].

At the same time as the presidential campaign, the second largest television company in Mexico (*TV-Azteca*) aired the *telenovela El Candidato* (The Candidate), mirroring the three politicians in reality.

1 He is one of the kingpins of Mexican politics and particularly from the PRI. He has occupied very important positions such as Secretary of Energy, Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Interior, Governor of the State of Sinaloa and Senator. He is also best known for being the first PRI presidential candidate to lose a presidential election.

2 Cuauhtémoc is the son of Lazaro Cardenas, Mexico's most-popular 20th-century President who is most well-known for expropriating oil interests of American and European petroleum companies before World War II. Cuauhtémoc had been twice a presidential candidate (1988, 1994) and in 1997 was elected governor of Mexico City, capital of the country and Mexico's most populated city. Some people believed his position as governor would be a stepping stone for his becoming a candidate in a third presidential election bid in 2000.



△ FIGURE 1

Explaining the 2000 Mexican presidential election through the *telenovela El Candidato* that aired in parallel and was based on the actual candidates and events is a cautionary account of how a fictional television series can influence a major national election. To understand this, one needs to go beyond seeing the series as purely entertainment. Instead, one needs to examine the *telenovela* from many perspectives, including media, sociology, political science, anthropology, history, etc. This includes taking a look at the full context of the culture, the language, and how the brain processes all that it takes in.

This paper analyzes how the *telenovela El Candidato* was intertwined with and could have interfered with a key recent political process, and how the television company that produced it also instrumentalized it for economical and political gain. Through empirical examples from the *telenovela*, I will analyze some of the cognitive paths and configurations proposed to viewers/potential voters.

*El Candidato* was presented as the first interactive *telenovela* of Mexican television. *El Candidato* tells the story of three different candidates but mostly it tells the story of a political process experienced by a country (Mexico of 2000) through a political party (an "official party"<sup>3</sup>) that tried to be democratic and how it managed issues of plurality in the election of a new president. In what to many seemed an attempt to expose or embarrass the PRI party, the *telenovela's* producers promised to highlight controversial topics such as the real assassination in 1994 of PRI's presidential candidate

3 The PRI was identified as an "official party" that all the *telenovela's* viewers could easily connect with the space of reality.

Luis Donaldo Colosio and stories of PRI involving corruption, lies, nepotism, infidelity, disloyalty, etc. Before examining the role played by *TV-Azteca* in airing the Presidential campaign and the *telenovela El Candidato*, I will briefly mention some political antecedents that allowed the PRI to govern during 71 years and then show how the television powers are linked to political powers.

## POLITICAL ANTECEDENTS

If there is one characteristic that best represents the PRI since its foundation in 1929 through the end of the 1980's, it is discipline. The discipline that has reigned in the PRI was this: the incumbent president in consultation with party's leaders selected the PRI's next candidate among his friends or closest collaborators in a procedure known as "the pointing of the finger," (*el dedazo*) a true "meta constitutional" practice.

In essence, given the PRI's overwhelming dominance, the president chose his successor. By choosing his successor, the incumbent was protected or "immunized" from being accused and prosecuted for cases of corruption during his term of office. The PRI's dominance was nearly absolute at all other levels as well. It held an overwhelming majority in the Chamber of Deputies, as well as every seat in the Senate and every state's governorship. And the PRI and the President of Mexico have historically held very tight relations with the media and particularly with television, always playing the role of an ideological device of political power.

## POLITICAL ANTECEDENTS IN MEXICAN TELEVISION

The organization of television reflects the political and economic system in Mexico. Television in Mexico began as a private enterprise without any judicial restrictions. As a result, private investors have found perfect investment conditions in Mexico. The country's presidents have been the only persons authorized to grant television rights and concessions that have enabled them to exploit commercial television.<sup>4</sup> It is an unregulated industry. And since television was intro-

4 Garcia Rubio, Claudia I. (2008). *Para entender la television en Mexico: Un analisis que decifra la pantalla*. Ed. Fragua San Pablo. Pp. 399; And Miro V, Juan Jose (1997). *La television y el poder politico en Mexico*. Ed. Diana. Pp. 267.

duced, politicians have seen the television business as their unconditional ally – a supporter of political campaigns in exchange for authorizations and concessions.

In 1972, the government bought channel 13 with the goal of satisfying widespread criticism, especially by the intellectual class, of the excesses of private television. In 1973, several smaller television companies merged to form *Televisa*, a company that later became the largest in Latin America and in the Spanish-speaking world. *Televisa's* CEO and owner was the charismatic Emilio Azcarraga Milmo who called himself a "soldier of the PRI and the President."

In 1983, President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), founded a public decentralized television station called the Mexican Institute of Television, widely-known as *Imevision*. The economic crisis, bad management and corruption were some of elements that led to its collapse. The government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) led his administration in 1992 to sell *Imevision* to private Mexican investors. Twenty-four hours after receiving four proposals, President Carlos Salinas, offered the station to his cousin Ricardo Salinas Pliego, the household electrical goods entrepreneur.<sup>5</sup> Ricardo Salinas transformed the public television station into *TV-Azteca*, the second largest private television company in Mexico after *Televisa*.

## TV-AZTECA, A NEW DEPARTURE FROM A PUBLIC ASSET INTO A COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISE

After a rocky start, *TV-Azteca's* strategy had focused on the two main components of *Televisa*: newscasts and *telenovelas*<sup>6</sup>. *TV-Azteca's* creation of its nightly newscast *Hechos de la Noche* was made to compete with *Televisa's 24 horas* and pushed back the nightly newscast *24 horas* that had aired for 26 years. During the 2000 presidential campaign, *Hechos de la Noche* was the most viewed nightly newscast in the country. However, *TV-Azteca* added and emphasized sensational programs that

5 The deadlines to drop off the proposal were fixed at July 16 (Friday). The authorities had until July 23 to study the proposals. However, on July 17 (only one day after) the authorities announced that the winner proposed 645 million dollars. Before this auction, some groups received a call from an unidentified official authority that advises them not to propose more than 450 million dollars. The well-respected journalist who reported what looked like a massive fraud against citizens' interests was Granados Chapa, Miguel Angel (1996). "Plaza Publica". *Reforma*. June 9. p. 7.

6 A *telenovela* is a popular limited-run serial television drama – a miniseries – that runs for a set period of time.

were very successful and for *Televisa* to compete, it began offering similar sensational programs that produced a “fair amount of competition” between *Televisa* and *TV-Azteca* creating what was referred to in Mexico as the “war of televisions.”

This war introduced two significant trends that made up the newscasts of both TV channels: in one trend, there was an emphasis on sensationalist current events journalism. In the other, there was an emphasis on scandals and gossip – sensationalist tabloid journalism devoid of content. The newscasts of both TV channels focused on spectacular and/or scandalous information. Both stations were producing what one *TV-Azteca* producer termed “docudramas” inspired by the reality of urban violence across the country. However, they were not inspired by facts, but rather the dramatic fabrication of reality. At *TV-Azteca*, producers were fabricating dramatic events and news, which were aired as if they were real. Examples included staged hold-ups where cameras would conveniently show up “by chance” to record the lurid details with close up. Eventually, an inquiry by the police led to several key producers being caught falsely reporting crime stories or commissioning projects that could best be referred to as “docufiction” (real-fake news). The *mise-en-scene* of these melodramatic news events had an impact on viewer’s emotions and nobody was aware of it.

This confusion of mixing private and public news, that is to say, national political interests and entertainment, had an important influence in the way the newscast viewers/potential electors perceived violence in the context of a Presidential election. This mixture of real news used in a fictional television series was unethical because a climate of violence was reinforced and glorified. Both televisions became judges of real-fake current events. In this competition, both newscasts were in competition to create the most spectacular *mise-en-scene* news-events and attract more viewers.

The competition pushed real newscasts to present their stories in segments (in a sort of episodes as if in a fictional real series) that teased viewers who then needed to come back each day to find out how stories turned out. It was similar to the daily suspenseful episodes of *telenovelas*. It was a case of television journalism imitating a “socially realistic” series. The presentation of news during the newscast becomes shorter but more fragmented and out of context.

Things in the “war of televisions” reached a low point when *TV-Azteca* used its newscast to support not only its neoliberal vision, but also to openly attack its political adversary. For example, on June 7, 1999 Paco Stanley, a national well-known television entertainer from *TV-Azteca*, was assassinated in a

public place. *TV-Azteca* suspended all its programs to send the cameras *on the scene* for live coverage of the crime. Then, *Televisa’s* and *TV-Azteca’s* “journalists” working as propagandists interviewed people in the streets and asked them what they thought about violence in the city of Mexico. Several sensational entertainers from both television stations accused Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano, Mexico City’s mayor from the leftist party at the time and demanded that he resign because according to them, he was responsible for the assassination and for the explosive grow of violence in the city.<sup>7</sup>

Ricardo Salinas, who owned the *TV-Azteca* station, interrupted the channel’s programming to launch in person what many called a public lynching using his position to attack the authorities of the city and particularly Cardenas.<sup>8</sup> This caused public outrage only between intellectuals. A few years before when the PRI still ruled the city of Mexico, the country lived through several political assassinations of national and international magnitude such as the presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, the PRI’s general secretary Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu or the Cardinal Posadas (among others) and no television channel launched a campaign to discredit the authorities. Nobody demanded the authorities to resign.

However, in Stanley’s assassination<sup>9</sup>, Ricardo Salinas and his affiliated stations targeted Cuauhtémoc Cardenas’s political aspirations for the 2000 presidential election in July. This campaign of discredit showed that *TV-Azteca* sought to portray Cardenas as a bad governor. Pragmatically this campaign openly reflected *TV-Azteca’s* political strategy against its political adversaries and in particular against Cardenas. Finally the dirty campaigns against the left-wing party had a significant cognitive negative influence on the perception of the viewers vis-à-vis the PRI’s and leftist candidates.<sup>10</sup>

7 Kenton T., Wilkinson, (2008). “Democracy Sponsored by Nafta?. Mexican Television in the Free Trade Era” Ch. 10 in Blankson, Isaac A.; Murphy, Patrick D. *Negotiating Democracy*. SUNY Press. p. 210.

8 Garcia Rubio, Claudia I. (2008). *Op. Cit.* The author presents a brief transcription the interventions of Ricardo Salinas and other sensational entertainers such as Jorge Garralda.

9 The first hypothesis presented by the general prosecutor of Mexico City, linked Stanley to organized crime and in particular indicated that Stanley consumed and sold drugs in the entertainment world and had a lot of debt with a notable drug-lord.

10 Chappell Lawson had shown that during the 2000 presidential election, *TV-Aztecass’* tone of the coverage was substantially more sympathetic towards Vicente Fox than that of *Televisa*. The author has also shown that *TV-Aztecass’* viewership or exposure worked powerfully in favor of Fox. These effects of coverage were large enough to change the outcome of the election and the news coverage exercised a powerful effect on voters’ choices. Lawson, Chappell (2004). “Television Coverage, Vote Choice, and the 2000 Campaign”. In *Mexico’s Pivotal Democratic Election*.

What was a public television asset was transformed into a partisan instrument of power. In the face of this kind of unethical and illegal use of television, politicians and their parties have their hands tied because they are supported by the two television companies with whom they need to work with for television rights and licensing. The two most viewed programs on Mexican television are newscasts and *telenovelas*, which apparently were both instrumental in the context of presidential elections.

## TELENOVELAS MADE BY TV-AZTECA

After founding *TV-Azteca*, Ricardo Salinas focused on competing with *Televisa* to change the way the *telenovelas* were traditionally produced for *Televisa*. *Telenovelas* made by *Televisa*, especially “pink” *telenovelas*, had happy endings. At the beginning of this adventure, *TV-Azteca* was associated with the production company called *Argos* owned by two journalists (one was a war correspondent). *Argos* helped *TV-Azteca* greatly by proposing political *telenovelas* closer to people’s reality (and away from “rosy” stories) such as *Nada Personal* and *Perfume de Mujer*. This change really led viewers to switch from *Televisa* to *TV-Azteca*. One of the most innovative practices presented by some of *TV-Azteca*’s *telenovelas* was the explicit introduction of real events into the scripts (such as the reference to sensational unresolved political assassinations in the country) and the narrative. This kind of narration was one of the antecedents to *El Candidato*.

## EL CANDIDATO<sup>11</sup>

The significance of this *telenovela* lies in the fact that it mimicked the actual election in real time and it was the first “participative” Mexican *telenovela* in the history of television. The producers (ZUBA productions and *TV-Azteca*) promised to show and to make references to recent or historical controversial facts in a way that Mexicans were not

used to.<sup>12</sup> To achieve this, they took advantage of the fact that *TV-Azteca* recorded national events for their nightly newscast and mixed them into the fictional script often in real time. *El Candidato*’s writers and producers followed the daily news and created a political agenda by incorporating real events or references into their fiction. Their cognitive goal clearly appeared to influence viewers’ perceptions by either supporting or denouncing corruption surrounding the viewers’ lives.

According to the journalist Varona Limia Arnoldo, the producers who framed *El Candidato* “wanted to show real events through fiction that reflected their understanding of the general public’s political consciousness.”<sup>13</sup> They wanted viewers to perceive the producers as mere “witnesses” and not “judges” or manipulators of historical events.<sup>14</sup> According to the producers, they only wanted to “show the reality of the country in a profound way.”<sup>15</sup>

*El Candidato* was intended to air for only six months but its success led the producers to extend it by four months. *El Candidato* was aired between August 16, 1999 and until June 16, 2000 (only two weeks before the real election!),<sup>16</sup> from Monday to Friday at 10 pm. Directly following *El Candidato*, *TV-Azteca* aired the most important newscast of its channel: *Hechos de la Noche*<sup>17</sup> where viewers could often see the same, but real news with the same images or references used in *El Candidato*.<sup>18</sup>

*El Candidato* is framed as a fictional election process where the president tries to impose his “official” candidate.

12 ZUBA is a contraction of two last names ZUrita and Bach. ZUBA is owned by the main actor of *El Candidato* Humberto Zurita who was also the director of the *telenovela*, his brother Gerardo Zurita, and his wife the actress Christian Bach. Humberto Zurita and Christian Bach are very well known actors in Mexico.

13 Varona Limia, Arnoldo (1999). “America Latina: las telenovelas que nos unen”. *Letraria*. Revista de los escritores hispanoamericanos en Internet. No. 80. 18 October.

14 Zurita, Gerardo (2004). Personal communication. Mexico, DF.

15 Alvarez, Ethel (1999). “Apuestan a una TV inteligente” *Reforma*. 18 August.

16 According to electoral law, presidential campaigns should stop at this point. In Mexico the presidential election at that time had duration of 6 months and voting day is organized always the first weekend of July. With the 2007 electoral reform, the campaigns were reduced only to three months.

17 At that specific time, this newscast was the most watched nation-wide.

18 “Over two-thirds of Mexicans get their information about politics primarily from the small screen, and even among the most affluent and educated segments of the population, television remains the dominant medium. Moreover, despite its traditional biases, television news is viewed as more credible than any other form of political communication in Mexico (...).” Chappell Lawson (2004). *Op. Cit.* p. 187.

Dominguez, Jorge I and Lawson, Chappell (Eds). Ed. Stanford University Press. Center for US-Mexican Studies. pp. 202-208.

11 The corpus of this article is part of my PhD dissertation and is composed of approximately 100 VHS videos containing 160 out of 190 episodes of *El Candidato*, as well as the nightly newscast, political advertisements, political platforms, spots, parody programs, etc., that I recorded daily for an entire year before the 2000 election.



The *telenovela* shows that even surrounded by corruption, it is possible to organize an election without fraud. During the official launch of *El Candidato*, Humberto Zurita (director, producer and actor -main character-) announced: “the *telenovela* aims to show that the right to vote is unique and democratic, that it allows people to be free and choose their government.”<sup>19</sup> This statement reflects the real concerns of voters, especially those who felt they had been pressured to support PRI in the past.

Ricardo Salinas, owner of *TV-Azteca*, said *El Candidato* was an example of a “different television... intelligent and one that makes Mexicans think.”<sup>20</sup> He insisted if the public supports this kind of program, *TV-Azteca* would continue to make more *telenovelas* like this even if the government doesn’t like it, “because it’s the public who is in charge.”<sup>21</sup> The producers tried to engage the audience interactively because they believed in the next election it was the only way for a new and different political candidate to come into power.<sup>22</sup> Besides producing and acting in *El Candidato*, Humberto Zurita decided to enter politics himself after the *telenovela* ended and was elected General Secretary of Actors and Performers of Mexico. This example demonstrates the crossing of frontiers between public and private where an actor playing the role of a key political figure becomes a political figure in real life.<sup>23</sup>

A similar crossing of lines occurred behind the scenes when Gerardo Sanchez Luna<sup>24</sup> an advertising copywriter for PRI candidates, became a co-scriptwriter for a political *telenovela*. When a journalist questioned Sanchez’s cross-over, Sanchez responded, “Before I got 30 seconds to show the political intentions of Colosio (candidate killed in 1994 during his campaign) and then the Zedillo (the replacement

candidate) but today, Jorge Patino and I have 160 chapters to convince the viewers to vote in favor of the *telenovela*.”<sup>25</sup> He continued, “...reality is fundamental but it is boring and monotonous; however the *telenovela* is like passing that reality through a magnification lens, giving a melodramatic sense to passages, events and characters.”<sup>26</sup>

Gerardo Sanchez recognized the potential represented by the argumentative and narrative structure of a *telenovela* where the scriptwriters have the time to present, develop and evoke ideas, beliefs, emotions, intentions, etc. *El Candidato* was constructed to produce emotions in parallel with the reality of the real political campaign. The producers wanted to connect emotionally with viewers’ situation and influence their actions in an election.<sup>27</sup>

In reaction to journalist’s criticisms, Gerardo Sanchez defended himself saying that even if he had worked for the PRI, he was not looking to support it (through the *telenovela*). Later, however, he made a declaration about his preferred candidate: “... [the fictional candidate] Humberto Zurita is a politician’s model who could love people, a man with clean and solid ideas and who disagrees with the current political system even if he is part of it.”<sup>28</sup> The fictional candidate happens to have similar, if not identical, characteristics and connections that correspond perfectly with the characteristics and campaign of the real candidate Vicente Fox who was the outsider of Mexican politics, challenging mainstream politics and opposing corruption.

The framing of the political figure showed by *El Candidato* helped Fox’s campaign.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the sad

19 Alvarez, Ethel (1999). *Op. Cit.*

20 *Ibid*

21 *Ibid*

22 There are some social categories studied by sociologists like age, gender, income, religion, family, geographic situation, etc., that link citizens with some political preferences. Without the intention of getting into detail, in those categories and their link with the 2000 Mexican presidential election: the younger people (just 18 years old), women, people with higher education, high income and urban people had voted for Vicente Fox. Moreno, Alejandro (2003). *El votante mexicano: Democracia, actitudes políticas y conducta electoral*. Ed. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Pp. 196.

23 “The bad news is that in today’s freewheeling media environment, consumers seem increasingly unable to distinguish truth from fiction, news from polemic, reality from fantasy”. Murray, Alan (2004). “Political Capital”. *Wall Street Journal*, May 11.

24 He worked in 1994 with the famous Mexican publicist Alazraki doing the political ads for the PRI’s candidate Ernesto Zedillo who became president of Mexico (1994-2000).

25 Garay, Adriana (1999). “Detras de El Candidato”. *Reforma*. September 19.

26 *Ibid*.

27 Even if this article mention and considers the role of emotions, this is not a proper paper focused on emotions but it considers the legitimate and underestimates importance of this element on other social sciences and humanities’ work. To go deeper in the field of emotions and its cognitive structure see among others: *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (1988). Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore and Allan Collins (eds). Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney. According to philosopher Gregory Currie in reference to desires and beliefs, “A creature capable of actions needs two things: a representation of what the world is like and a representation of what it wants the world to be like. Only with those two things in place is it sensible to speak of the creature seeking to bring about a change in the world.” Currie, Gregory (1999). “Narrative Desire”. *In Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London. P. 188.

28 Garay, Adriana (1999). *Op cit.*

29 “We may often experience a fusion between what a film (-or a *telenovela*) element represents and the feelings and emotions it evokes”... “because it follows that the film-viewing experience must be described as a process, a mental flow, with bodily reactions as sounding boards. The flow is a double one [-in the case of *El*

social reality (in the fiction) framed by the *telenovela* triggered viewers' positive emotions towards a candidate who stood for changing the environment of corruption portrayed in the *telenovela* and experienced by the public in their daily lives. From a psychological perspective, the sentiment cued by the *telenovela* in that pragmatical context of elections created an emotional connection with viewers. The viewers experience is considered to be a "genuine emotion,"<sup>30</sup> and have their "roots in the same kind of processes that generate real-world emotions."<sup>31</sup> In order to be part of and "function well" in the social world as a logical, analytical and rational being, we need emotions, because "emotions and cognition are two aspects of the way our embodied brain functions."<sup>32</sup>

On the topic of *El Candidato* and its main objectives, actress and producer Christian Bach stated: "It is true that the central drama revolves around topics such as corruption, lies, nepotism, infidelity, disloyalty but the *telenovela* doesn't approach sensationalist topics."<sup>33</sup> It was clear the producers would never approach those topics from a sensationalist point of view or even try to do a parody of them. Doing so would be counter productive. The producers needed to be more subtle.

Even if the producers did not openly accept the idea of potentially instrumentalizing *El Candidato*, creating a special editorial board to help the scriptwriters and producers manage some news and topics reflected their strategy and their political leanings behind this *telenovela*.<sup>34</sup>

In reality, the creation of this editorial board was a pragmatic move to support the economic and political channel's

interests in the real elections. It reflected support for Vicente Fox who was the most liberal candidate whose positions served their best interests. The presence of Sergio Sarmiento as the Head of Information was essential for the *telenovela* in constructing the sense of interactivity that mixed actual current events with fiction. To examine how viewers are influenced by the *telenovela* in the context of real elections and its cognitive impact from perception to action, I have developed an approach I call cognitive-socio-pragmatics.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The necessity for an approach like cognitive-socio-pragmatics has emerged from the new discoveries and developments of cognitive science (CS) in recent years. Usually social sciences and humanities have not done enough empirical research on the role played by our brains in our daily lives, in processes such as perception, choice, decision-making, reasoning, action, comprehension, emotions and so forth. However, our brains are mediators between one's self and the external (social) world. "CS is typically identified with the study of single individuals, as if the mind were locked in a brain box."<sup>35</sup>

My approach uses the theory of conceptual blending or conceptual integration<sup>36</sup> based on the theory of mental spaces<sup>37</sup> as a point of departure. Blending is a theoretical framework that integrates the information around us in the social world in order to construct meaning out of it. Blending is a basic mental operation that allows two mental spaces to connect through the projection of structures into a network of mental spaces with the goal of creating a third space (blend) that has its own emergent structure (which is not present at the beginning) and that appears as a creative process of imagination.

One of the main ideas is the notion of projection between structures that are linked by connectors. "We estab-

---

*Candidato* is triple: the local knowledge embedded by the news or historic events in Mexico; audiovisual data flow from eyes and ears to the brain/mind, and narrative events flow forward in the diegetic world from beginning to end". Grodal, Torben (1999). "Emotions and Narrative Patterns". In *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London. P. 128.

30 Tan, S. H. Ed and Frijda, Nico. (1999). "Sentiment in Film Viewing". In *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London. P. 51

31 Plantinga, Carl and Smith M, Greg. (1999). "Introduction". In *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London. P. 6.

32 Grodal, Torben (1999). *Op. Cit.* p. 127.

33 Olvera, Marco Antonio (1999). "Inician Campaña el lunes". *Reforma*. 13 August.

34 The editorial board included: Sergio Sarmiento, an editorial advisor, and Ignacio Suarez Vazquez who worked as the coordinator of advisors for *TV-Azteca's* president Ricardo Salinas Pliego. The board managed controversial topics, the cases of censorship and self-censorship, the references to real topics and events and the political limits of the *telenovela*. The producers argued publically the board was established to reassure the public of their "objectivity" *vis-a-vis* a specific candidate.

35 Donald, Merlin (2012). "An Evolutionary Approach to Culture". In *The Axial Age and Its consequences*. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (Eds.). The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge and London. P. 49.

36 Fauconnier, Gilles and Turner, Mark (1995). "Conceptual Integration and Formal Expression". *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*. Vol. 10. Num. 3. pp183-202. For reasons of time and space, I won't be available to develop this approach, perhaps only mentions some concept used for this paper.

37 This theory was first developed by: Fauconnier, Gilles. (1984) *Espaces mentaux. Aspects de la construction de sens dans les langues naturelles*. Ed. Minuit. Paris. It was then upgraded in: Fauconnier, Gilles (1997). *Mappings in Thought and Language*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

lished [for biological and cultural reasons] links between different objects' nature (real objects, images, beliefs, desires, etc.), and those links established allow us the reference of one object (source) by the bias of another one (target) linked to the first one properly"<sup>38</sup> and this concept has been called "pragmatic function mapping". This kind of mapping plays an important role in structuring our knowledge base."<sup>39</sup> This "pragmatic function mapping" is based on a metonymical principle known as the "principle of identification" that states that in a pragmatically linked situation, one description of the space source could serve to identify the target (example: source (trigger)+connector+target). The mappings between the two initial spaces could be made based on a different nature of connections such as: identity, similarity, analogy, pragmatic function, representation, etc.<sup>40</sup>

Projection, in a metaphorical sense, is the backbone of analogy, categorization and grammar, and connects frames to specific situations. According to Charles Fillmore, the notion of a frame is synonymous to schema, script, scenario, ideational, scaffolding, cognitive model or folk theory.<sup>41</sup> So the frame is the characterization of a small scene or abstract situation in accord with a certain context. The frame structures the sense of a category of a word or an action. The frame is also a kind of envisioning of the world from a text (author, movie director, speech of a politician, etc.), it refers to the perspective through which a narrative is presented and that schematizes a situation and encourages the interlocutor to construct a visualization.

A metaphorical projection and the connected structure play a central role in the construction of meaning and reasoning, but is constrained by the nature of our brains and its mental simulation capacities that is called Embodied Simulation Hypothesis (ESH).<sup>42</sup> The idea of ESH "is that you

make meaning by creating experiences for yourself [in your brain and unconscious] that – if you're successful – reflect the experiences that the speaker [writer, movie director, etc.], intended to describe."<sup>43</sup> When we watch a movie or read a novel we do not imagine ourselves related to the characters or events as if we were there. However, we have embedded experiences that allow us to drive the "cognitive flow" to understand the reality or fiction in front of us.

Torben Grodal summarizes perfectly the cognitive processes when viewers are face to face to a film (or photograph, book, interlocutor, television program, etc.), which roughly occurs in this way: "First, a given film frame/shot activates ear and eye. These perceptual clues are then processed in the rear part of the brain by a series of filterings and synthesizations to model three-dimensional objects. If this construction of objects is successful it will lead, via a series of mental processes (for instance, matching what is seen with memorized information), to a mental representation of what is seen and heard. This in turn induces affective reactions in part determined by attention and the activation of memories and associations. The film processes will then activate representations of possible actions and perhaps induce muscle tension and an activation of the frontal and prefrontal brain areas linked to motor action".<sup>44</sup> The cognitive constructions are underspecified by the support that triggers them whether it be linguistic or visual support, or support constituted by social praxis and/or human interactions.

As mentioned above, CS studies the single experience of individuals, "as if the mind were locked in a brain box." And, "if meaning is based on experience with the world – the specific actions and percepts an individual has had –, then it may vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture. And meaning will also be deeply personal."<sup>45</sup> However CS does not consider the social *genesis* of individuals as social agents nor does it consider the principles and categories of the social world such as: religion, social class, economic income, gender, geography, etc. Social sciences, humanities and cognitive sciences share a common interest because "the

the brain that direct physical action light up. The idea is that simulation creates echoes in our brains of previous experiences, attenuated resonances of brain patterns that were active during previous perceptual and motor experiences. We use our brains to simulate percepts and actions without actually perceiving or acting". Pp. 14-15.

38 Fauconnier, Gilles. (1984). *Ibid.* pag.15.

39 "Pragmatic function mapping, like projection mapping, will often be responsible for semantic change over time". Fauconnier, Gilles (1997). *Op. Cit.* p. 11.

40 Coulson, Seana and Oakley, Todd (2000). "Blending Basics". *Cognitive Linguistics* 11-3/4.

41 Fillmore, Charles J. (1981) "Frame Semantics". *Linguistics in the Morning Calm: selected papers from SICOL*, Seoul Korea.

42 Bergen, K. Benjamin (2012). *Louder Than Words. The New Science of How The Mind Makes Meaning*. Basic Books. New York. Pp. 296. According to Benjamin Bergen, "simulation is the creation of mental experiences of perception and action in the absence of their external manifestation...The theory proposes that embodied simulation makes use of the same parts of the brain that are dedicated to directly interacting with the world. When we simulate seeing, we use the parts of the brain that allow us to see the world; when we simulate performing actions, the parts of

43 Bergen, K. Benjamin (2012). *Ibid.* p. 16.

44 Grodal, Torben (1999). *Op. Cit.* p. 132.

45 Bergen, K. Benjamin (2012). *Op Cit.* p. 16.



cognitive activities of a culture are organized, governed, and distributed across an entire population group.<sup>46</sup>

I will not consider and mobilize the social categories that also play a role in the construction of sense of mental events in an explicit way. Through cognitive-socio-pragmatics, my goal is to research and explain socio-political phenomenon through the deep analysis of brain-culture co-evolution<sup>47</sup> (in my personal case “popular culture”).

However, every individual brain is surrounded by different socio-cultural contexts and all individual knowledge of the social world is a collective act of construction. “The social environment created by culture deeply affects the physical architecture of our brains and the way that individual brains deploy their resources”<sup>48</sup>. Here, I try to bridge the gap between the biological and social worlds through the concept of *Habitus* employed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu defines *Habitus* as a cognitive system of dispositions or structures, from a social origin that the individual uses in a practical way to know the social world (collective). The knowledge that an individual (who is part of it) has of the object itself informs the construction of knowledge about the reality of the object.<sup>49</sup> Those cognitive structures used by individuals to understand the social world are embedded social class structures restrained by the physiological capacities of the brain.

Bourdieu states, “The *habitus* could be understood as a structure of mind characterized by a set of acquired schemata, sensibilities, dispositions and taste.” The *Habitus* is a “cognitive device” socially ingrained in individuals that structures the historical schemata of perception and appreciation as a result of an objective (embodied) division of class.<sup>50</sup>

The biology and culture co-evolution (language, social categories, meaning, and cognitive configurations, etc.) is balanced by the sight of how the context (pragmatics) contributes meaning to where events and phenomenon take place. In order to see how these concepts could be used to interpret the 2000 presidential election, we must describe how *El Candidato* manipulated legitimate political news and used it for their own purposes in fictional storytelling.

46 Donald, Merlin (2012). *Op. Cit.* p. 49.

47 I borrow this idea from Donald, Merlin (2012). *Op. Cit.* 50.

48 Donald, Merlin (2012). *Ibid.* p. 50.

49 Bourdieu, Pierre (1975). *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Les Editions de Minuit. Paris. p. 544.

50 Bourdieu, Pierre (1975). *Ibid.* p. 546.

## THE PLACE OF POLITICS IN *EL CANDIDATO*

Starting with the title itself that was used as a pragmatic functional mapping, *El Candidato* established a link between the socio-political real space of the 2000 presidential campaign and the fictional space of the *telenovela*. Given the political context in people’s minds, the title evoked a potential source of government criticism in the mental space of fiction, and they knew the events, characters or situations in the fiction would be targeting the space where the PRI governed.

To understand the thematic choice of *El Candidato* in a crucial political time in Mexico, there is an obvious clue. The choice of airing the *telenovela* in parallel to the real election could have been interpreted as a political pragmatic calculation. Speculating about the timing, one could see a potential Machiavellian<sup>51</sup> political move on the part of *TV-Azteca*, potentially looking to influence the political choices of viewers/voters in the 2000 presidential election. In the real space, all the citizens knew the PRI was called the “official party” and in the *telenovela* the Popular Alliance Party (PAP) was also called the “official party.” The principle of identification allows us, through the verbal reference of the “official party,” to connect both spaces without doubt. So PRI+PAP= Official parties. In the space of the *telenovela*, PAP’s politicians are portrayed as corrupt, inefficient and with links to drug lords and cartels. The *telenovela* shows the PAP’s corruptive practices inside the party, the antidemocratic president’s practices to choose their successors, their conspiracies, their use of violence, and their corrupt links to entrepreneurs. Using PAP’s characteristics as the space source, and applying the principle of identification helps to identify the space target and almost all the viewers were effortlessly aware that *El Candidato* targeted the PRI in the real space with those negative characteristics.<sup>52</sup>

51 Blakey Vermeule applies the concept of Machiavelian Intelligence Hypothesis (as a mental mechanism link to mind reading) to literary characters but we can extrapolate it and use it for visual experience. According to her, “we evolve to live in highly complex socially stratified groups. This mechanism is specially attuned to calculation, cooperation and conflict. In other words, this mechanism helps us to think several moves ahead on a giant social chessboard”. Mind reading means simply that people “represents to our selves the mental states of other people –attributing to them belief, intentions, desires and attitudes”. Vermeule, Blakey (2010). *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. Pp. 30-39.

52 One of the biggest discoveries in Cognitive Science is the concept of the *cognitive unconscious*, which the three most important characteristics are: 1. Our thoughts are unconscious in the sense that 2. It operates beneath the level of cog-

However, *El Candidato* is more subtle and complex than it appears. The producers emphasize, and frame, the main character (*El Candidato*) in a very positive way by featuring a politician who was in the system but who fights against the system from within. The *telenovela* portrayed a modern hero, an outsider, somebody who could save the population from its corrupt politicians. The positive framework of the *El Candidato* story (PAP's candidate), for example, does not directly link Francisco Labastida (PRI's candidate) in the space of reality because he is in the mainstream of historical PRI's politicians. And Cardenas, the other real candidate, could not be directly linked as well. But the cognitive target of the writers and *TV-Azteca* was Vicente Fox (from the PAN), the outsider who challenged the PRI's system. And some studies concluded *TV-Azteca* was the television company that supported Vicente Fox the most.<sup>53</sup>

The political dimensions in the fictional narrative were constructed with three different layers. The first one was created by a general framework that shows how politics is practiced and was part of the DNA of the fictional political party (PAP). Even if this party was imaginary, there are many obvious and explicit examples proving an analogical connection and identification between both spaces: the party's logos, use of colors and verbal references, etc.

▷ SEE FIGURE 1 (P. XXXX)

The physical features of real and fictional candidates mobilize in viewers' minds a whole set of local knowledge, connectors, mappings, representations, emotions, etc.<sup>54</sup> However, what is interesting here are the visual characteristics of the fictional candidate of PUC who represents Vicente Fox. In

nitive awareness, inaccessible to consciousness and 3. Operating too quickly to be focused on. The result of cognition seems generally as natural but in reality it implies a sophisticated interpretation of operations and calculus. The visible-conscious thought is just the top of a bigger unconscious structure, which is hidden. This hidden structure shapes the way in which we conceptualize all the aspects of our experience. For a deeper discussion see: Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. Basic Books. Pp. 624.

53 Chappell, Lawson (2004). *Op. Cit.* pp. 188-199. This study had monitored only the mainstream devices such as the time in spots, presentations, interviews, etc. without considering the cognitive influence that the *telenovela El Candidato* could have.

54 For reason of time and space, I won't develop here. This part and more connections between both spaces had developed in a deeper way in: Abarca, Ivan (2011). *Construction de la fiction et la réalité dans l'image et le discours politique : Analyse de la telenovela El Candidato et la campagne présidentielle mexicaine en 2000*. PhD dissertation. Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Paris, France

the mind of many Mexicans, what emerges automatically as a new structure between the two mental spaces of fiction and reality in the space blend (the third space) as a product of imagination, is the image of Manuel "Maquío" Clouthier presidential candidate in 1988, and Diego Fernandez de Cevallos a presidential candidate in 1994, both from the PAN's (Fox political party).

MANUEL "MAQUIO"  
CLOUTHIER



DIEGO FERNANDEZ  
DE CEVALLOS



△ FIGURE 2

In the second political dimension, *El Candidato* makes significant verbal references to current political news that connects viewers to the country's past. This "strategy" has two objectives: the first one is to inform the viewers about important news that happened the same day or recent events that are shown in the *El Candidato* broadcast before being shown later in the real nightly newscast. The second objective is to provoke a debate and/or criticize certain measures and decisions made by the real government. For example: two characters in *El Candidato* debate an action taken by the government that day in the space of reality such as the creation of a new division of the police force. While the fictional characters discuss the action, one gestures to show incredulity, suspicion, etc., and others criticize the action, giving their opinion (often against the leftist party governing the capital). This technique is a very subtle way of expressing the television channel's veiled opinion through the fictional characters and spreading doubts about a real political action.

Another strategy used by the *telenovela*, is to take advantage of a specific real event (such as a presidential debate, a demonstration or an accident) to instrumentalize or target a specific politician in the real space. It was not surprising to watch fictional characters launch criticism against decisions by real politicians.

*El Candidato* was very subtle, however, in how it leveled criticism of real politicians and real events. To pick up on what was really happening in the *telenovela*, members of the audience needed to pay attention and have a certain

local knowledge to connect and to map/connect a specific criticism with the *telenovela's* target. Viewers do not always have this knowledge or, put differently, they simply didn't see anything suspicious because as social individuals they do not have the same *habitus* and hence they have different predispositions, sensibilities, and structures of perception as a result of the division of class.

The third political dimension is to make reference to real events or images well known by the viewers that nowadays are part of "cultural narratives" of Mexicans. These narratives are stable events, representations of representations (meta-representations) in people's collective memory. Those cultural narratives bridge the individual with the collective through the concept of *habitus* where viewers mobilize whole acquired schemata of a social origin to make sense of those stories. This third strategy does not appear to produce a critic thinking about a specific event, but it does intend to mobilize a whole cognitive network including: emotions, local context and common ground knowledge with the goal of connecting them to the system of actions and decision-making that make up cultural narratives that are deeply ingrained in citizens' minds and bodies. This was the case when the *telenovela* recreated the assassination of the 1994 PRI's presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, or real images of poor people voting in past elections, or references related to the Virgin of Guadalupe, "the mother of Mexico" or images of historical heroes from the Independence in 1810 and the Revolution in 1910<sup>55</sup>.

Among several other cases, one of the most emblematic was the Virgin of Guadalupe. On September 9 1999, Vicente Fox was in a meeting and before it ended, two of his children presented him with the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe and he took advantage of this opportunity to give a speech with independence tones. Three days later, the fictional candidate who represented Fox also gave a speech with the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then *El Candidato* used the fictional character with this image as a *leit motif* (four or five times) and that fictional character's narrative included giving speeches with independence tones.

What is interesting here as a result of the mapping between Vicente Fox in the source space and his fictional can-

55 "However, the emotional effect will be enhanced if the viewers are acquainted with "grand" historical narratives (Nazism, World War II, the invention of the A-bomb) and the Jewish biblical narratives [local-national narratives]. The emotional charge of these themes is activated as support for the narratives. Such charges are sometimes "partial activations" in that they may be nonconscious or may exist at the periphery of our attention". Grodal, Torben (1999). *Op Cit.* p. 129.

didate's (in the space target) use of the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe is the emergent structure of Don Miguel Hidalgo (in the space blend). The priest Miguel Hidalgo (1810) is the most famous and emblematic hero of the independence of Mexico, who started the movement of liberation from Spain with the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe as well. Miguel Hidalgo is considered the father of the patria – the liberator. When viewers integrate the information of both spaces between Vicente Fox and his fictional candidate, there is a projection of common elements (candidates, flag of the Virgin, speeches, etc.) into the blend where the figure of Miguel Hidalgo emerges automatically. The positive characteristics of Miguel Hidalgo (as liberator, father of the patria, etc.) emerge as well as in the blend and are retro-projected to the initial spaces giving a positive viewpoint to the space of Vicente Fox, which is the real space of action. Vicente Fox's conscious use of the flag had connected an analog cognitive network of configurations of knowledge, history, inferences, and actions, etc. These are deeply embedded in Mexican culture and exploited politically by Vicente Fox in the real space, mobilizing the image of Miguel Hidalgo in the historical-source space and the reinforcing frame of the fictional candidate representing Vicente Fox in *El Candidato*



△ FIGURE 4, 5, 6

The configuration of Vicente Fox with the flag is visually based on the historical and heroic act of Miguel Hidalgo in 1810 in the sense that it reminds Mexicans of the way that Miguel Hidalgo had liberated Mexico from Spanish domination. This framing proposes to viewers an analogous unconscious path that Vicente Fox, through the 2000 election, will also liberate Mexico from the seventy-year domination of PRI.

This configuration had the purpose of reminding Mexicans in an unconscious way that Miguel Hidalgo had liberated Mexico from Spanish domination and that Vicente Fox through the 2000 election will liberate Mexico from the seventy-year domination of PRI. This aspect is reinforced by the Culture, because the month of September is known in Mexico as the month of the patria (*El mes de la Patria*) where the figure of Miguel Hidalgo with the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe decorates the public spaces of official institutions all over the country and is also reinforced by the ritual of the “celebration of the independence”. This historical and cultural narrative is embedded deep in Mexicans and is a part of their *habitus* as a system of predispositions through which they see what they are as a nation especially because the Virgin of Guadalupe is also part of this deep *habitus* and strong identity of *Mexican-ness*.

We can see that Vicente Fox took advantage of Miguel Hidalgo’s political and symbolical capital as a historical figure, to link it cognitively to his own political capital in the context of the 2000 presidential election and reinforced that frame (“liberator”) by the numerous appearances of the fictional candidate.

The emotions<sup>56</sup> and cognitive inferences emerged in the space blend that pops up unconsciously in people’s minds to evoke what Miguel Hidalgo and other historical heroes represent in the history of the country such as: liberty, democracy, revolution, independence, sacrifice, freedom, unity, etc., and that Vicente Fox capitalized with his campaign promises of change, democracy, liberating Mexico from the PRI, challenging the system, etc. However emotions can also be structured and culturally constructed.<sup>57</sup>

We find that the producers used some actors’ physical features or religious artifacts as connectors with other mental spaces for the purpose of increasing and amplifying the network’s meaning. For example, in the space blend (the emergent structure) the figures of candidates Clouthier and Cevallos are brought to mind.. This combination between fiction and reality was possible in part thanks to the device of interactivity set up by the close collaboration between the newscast crew and the *telenovela* team.

---

56 ...“The functional role of emotions in relation to imagined events in fiction is different from ordinary emotions, and that emotions in relation to fiction are disconnected from moral reasoning to a degree that ordinary emotions are not”. Bruun Vaage, Margrethe (2013). “Fictional reliefs and reality checks”. Screen 54:2. Summer. Pp. 218-237. PDF version.

57 Plantinga, Carl and Smith, M Greg (1999). *Op. Cit.* P. 9.

## HOW THE INTERACTIVITY WAS CONSTRUCTED?

Since the beginning of *El Candidato*, the producers wanted viewers to participate in this *telenovela* in different ways. The producers set up a special phone line where the viewers could suggest ideas for the script or to alert producers to an exceptional event happening in real time such as a fire, a demonstration, an assassination, etc. On this telephone line, the viewers could also give their point of view about a political topic, an actor, or the overall story. *TV-Azteca*, eventually sent a team – perhaps their nightly news crew – with cameras to record actual events and evaluate whether the event fit into *El Candidato*’s story line. If the events were relevant, producers would incorporate them into the script and/or broadcast them in the real newscast.

Sometimes, the *telenovela* showed or made reference to the most important news of the day even before the nightly newscast broadcasted that news. *TV-Azteca* and *El Candidato* very often blurred the lines between the interest of public affairs and private entertainment. Actually, they merged both into a fictional program for the purpose of entertainment. To do this, they transformed the interest that viewers have in civic and state matters – an interest in the republic – into an entertainment program where real news was dramatized under the guise of fiction. Put simply, they injected real news events into a fictional landscape that mirrored what was happening in the day-to-day lives of an audience who would soon be electing its civic leaders.

The producers also created an email-address ([elcandidato@tvazteca.com.mx](mailto:elcandidato@tvazteca.com.mx)) where viewers could send in their comments. With the same e-mail, viewers could get access to a form to fill out and share their ideas about topics including actors, specific issues, real politicians’ speeches or declarations, and special or extraordinary events. According to the producer Gerardo Zurita (brother of the *telenovela*’s lead actor Humberto Zurita) some days they got around 300 e-mails per day. In response to viewers’ comments, the producers decided to create a female main character (to include more women in politics).<sup>58</sup> Zurita also commented that based on feedback from viewers, viewers’ opinions changed towards politics after they saw the fictional versions of the real political debates.<sup>59</sup>

---

58 After the 2000 presidential election, I speculate that the participation of women in politics in reality had increased considerably as a consequence of *El Candidato* but this would need to be proved by further studies.

59 Personal interview with the producer, January 2004.



Towards the end of *El Candidato*, the producers asked the viewers how they should end the *telenovela* and they received 19,206 suggestions. Those suggestions were reduced to two and viewers were invited to vote between the two scenarios.

The producers had also set up an information center where they managed all the information they received by mail, phone or via the newscast material produced on the *telenovela*. According to the producers, the interactive part was actually the most challenging part of *El Candidato* because of the difficulty of mixing or integrating the fictional script with real situations. The communication between the producers and the viewers was as personal as possible. Producers would send a note to viewers asking them to watch specific episodes or sequences that related to the viewers' e-mail messages. According to Gerardo Zurita, even if *El Candidato* was fictional, the public needs truthfulness in the story. Using interactivity or viewers' participation, the producers created a fiction that was close to real – that simulated reality – in a way that often resulted in the perceptual disappearance of boundaries between fiction and reality.

## EL CANDIDATO A REAL FICTION OR A FICTIONAL REALITY?

*El Candidato* was a political-fictional melodrama fed basically by real events that integrated and reflected the national political scene. The fact that the *telenovela* was aired in parallel to the real election gave an added boost to the fictional story because the narrative was perceived as fiction but was well integrated with the real socio-political context. *El Candidato* was realistic and appeared truthful because it represented what people believed happens in real politics. In this case, it also reflected a kind of common knowledge of culture and politics (*habitus*) shared by viewers and the producers.<sup>60</sup> Producers and viewers share a general *habitus* of beliefs, perceptions and desires about the political change. In his study on "Narrative Desire", Gregory Currie states, "desiring things with the imagination (the sort of desiring involved in narrative desire) might make one more prone to desire it in reality."<sup>61</sup> This idea applied to the viewers of *El Candidato*,

and thus appeared to influence their outlook on politics and whom they voted for.

Even if the *telenovela* is a melodrama that exaggerates gestures and stories, fiction is inserted into a meaningful structure that parallels real life. Even if by definition, the *telenovela* is a metafiction (representation of a representation), the producers wanted to touch people's emotions and present the story in a realistic context, close to things that people see, know, experience, understand and can imagine effortlessly through the mechanism of Embodied Simulation Hypothesis (ESH). Viewers have embedded experiences that allow them to drive the "cognitive flow" to understand the reality or fiction in front of them.

Imagination is crucial to processing information about the real world and the information obtained through *El Candidato* was also important to understanding Mexican real world-politics. Even if people know they are watching fiction, they allow themselves to believe what seems real (ESH). They willingly suspend disbelief, to use the words of the 19th century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. What the viewer sees on the screen can be analogous to what he or she perceives in reality. As Kendall Walton points out in relation to mimesis as make-believe, everything we see on a screen or a page feeds our imaginations.<sup>62</sup>

In *telenovelas*, reality has an important presence. When producers mix the real with fiction, they are seeking to create an anchor point with a physical and cultural world where producers and receptors live and share a *habitus*, a world that they both understand. In this case, the producers then created a framework or "device" connecting the fictional narrative to the real presidential campaign and to the history of the country in general. This kind of strategy guides the viewer's reading of the social-political world through a specific frame, between *El Candidato* and the real campaign (between the space source and target). This strategy gives the *telenovela* a different status as a continual fictional guide to the presidential election that resonates with viewers' predispositions, tastes, and perceptions. *El Candidato* helped viewers to read "the reality" at that time from an abstract socio-political world.<sup>63</sup>

60 "Language matters to us because it is a vehicle for meaning-it allows us to take the desires, intentions, and experiences in our heads and transmit a signal through space that makes those thoughts pop up in someone else's head." Bergen K, Benjamin (2012). *Op. Cit.* p. 5.

61 Currie, Gregory. (1999). *Op Cit.* p. 198.

62 "When viewers are confronted with pixels and words on a screen or a page, they are prop for our make believe." Walton, Kendall (1993). *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Ed. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.

63 According with Blakey Vermeule, what is special about fiction is that viewers are rewarded with the most intense cognitive stimulation: social information... "for-



Like any melodrama, the *telenovela*'s goals are related to dreams, imagination, creativity and utopia. However, the fact that *El Candidato* mixes those dimensions with images from real current events or at times becomes partly documentary (socially realistic)<sup>64</sup> in relation to the history of Mexico, it poses an ontological problem of docu-fiction. *El Candidato* is fiction but in the socio-political context of the 2000 presidential election, it became a "pre digested"<sup>65</sup> reinterpretation by the producers - a document of history attesting to the private appropriation of history by citizens. Mixing documentary (real and historical facts) with fiction (private leisure –a love story), *El Candidato* tried to legitimize the set of arguments and comments that it presents through fictional characters. On the contrary, it winds up communicating a false and misleading pseudo-historic narrative. Doing so, *El Candidato* transforms itself as a fictional prop into an exegetic document that allows viewers to read and "falsely" interpret the socio-political reality. *El Candidato* became a co-constructor of historical facts already interpreted and inserted into fiction.

Despite the appearance of being an opened-up political conscience, the *telenovela* is above all a commercial product of a huge industry. In appearance, *El Candidato* challenges the linear narrative of real and even sometimes the legitimate version of historical events. *El Candidato* constructed a new perception of reality and raised awareness focusing on some points and hiding others. The most important hidden elements are those that are there and look natural. *El Candidato* hides things by choosing to frame and represent only small parts of the whole socio-political picture. A remaining question is how did *TV-Azteca* instrumentalized the *telenovela El Candidato* and the news for its political interests?

---

mation that would be too costly, dangerous and difficult to extract from the world on our own". Vermeule, Blakey (2010). *Op. Cit.* p. 14.

64 I borrow this concept from Margrethe Bruun Vaage "this arguably usually entails that it is a fiction that borrows from the nonfiction mode, in that it clearly directs the spectator's attention to the real world, makes assertions about the state of this world, and typically wants the spectator to learn more about the real world by watching the fiction." Bruun Vaage, Margrethe (2013). *Op. Cit.* PDF version.

65 "We do not usually rely upon the emotions to organize fictional film events for us as much as we rely upon the emotions to perform this task for us in ordinary life because, in the main, fiction film events have been emotionally predigested for us by the filmmakers. That is, the filmmakers have foregrounded what features of the events in the film are salient" (including camera position, composition, lighting, editing, etc.) Caroll, Noel (1999). "Film, Emotion, and Genre". In *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London. P.29.

## COGNITIVE IMPLICATIONS OF MIXING REAL AND HISTORICAL EVENTS INTO FICTION IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL ELECTIONS

The most important cognitive element is that *El Candidato* was a propaganda program supporting the candidacy of Vicente Fox, disguised as a *telenovela* that most citizens, politicians, journalists and intellectuals did not recognize or challenge. Through *El Candidato*, *TV-Azteca* "naturalized" and framed its private political interests under the guise of interactivity from real events and taking advantage of the electoral socio-political context. When *TV-Azteca* mixes the news of the day into the *telenovela El Candidato* and then features the same news on a live television newscast, this results in a distortion and manipulation, even if events are real. It seems clear that the purpose of mixing fiction with reality was to push the viewers to focus their attention to the real world where the PRI had governed for more than seven decades with striking results of corruption, poverty, assassinations, etc. The goal was to produce emotions and eventually incite action against this political party in the next election. As Gregory Currie reiterates, the complexity of our imaginations can likely be intimately connected with our capacity to act.<sup>66</sup>

Some of the viewers would have the impression that what they were watching was what really happened in reality but being hidden by the PRI government and revealed by the *telenovela. El Candidato*'s narrative was linear and could be called canonical, but the innovation was the insertion of reality into fiction<sup>67</sup>. However, the political context, the theme and the fact that the show included current events created an effective "mental flow" from perception to embodied simulation leading to action (viewers' changing their behavior). The linear story was powerful enough because it mobilized the whole network of our cognitive and social systems based on the *habitus* of Mexicans, on how the social environment of the election had changed the physiological synapsis in viewer's brains.

The viewers needed to have a very high level of awareness to distinguish between what was real and what was not.

---

66 "A complex mental organ like the imagination is not likely to be disconnected from our capacity to act." Currie, Gregory. (1999). *Op. Cit.* p. 197.

67 Torben Grodal qualifies canonical stories as a superior example of how our cognitive systems work together: "interaction of cognition, emotions, concerns and actions function by means of a linear phasic flow, supported by non-linear and atemporal associations networks". Grodal, Torben (1999). *Op. Cit.* p. 144.

If we consider that at that time *Hechos de la Noche* was the most viewed nightly newscast in the country and considering the studies about the television and news in Mexico quoted before (Lawson 2004:187), certainly *El Candidato* had a more important role in the 2000 Presidential election supporting Vicente Fox than what we think. *El Candidato* did not necessarily help Fox's campaign directly but it visually and emotionally legitimized a negative frame against the PRI on a daily basis.

*El Candidato* practiced symbolic violence on the most "vulnerable viewers" because they thought that they were watching an entertainment program when in truth, they were watching a veiled propaganda program. *El Candidato* was continuously producing double political meanings that viewers did not judge at the same level due to the origins of our *habitus* in which some viewers seemed to be more vulnerable.

Some studies have shown that, what really counts in the real cognitive impact on voters in the context of an election, is what they know or are willing to infer. Viewers use their massive semantic inference system to infer and to connect many different things because they have a pre-existing knowledge about politics and because we have meta-representational capacities. The embodied simulation hypothesis allows *El Candidato*'s viewers to make sense of the passage between their personal experiences and knowledge about the PRI in the real space and the fictional script.

The way that the *telenovela* framed the "official party" (PRI) in reality in a very negative way "resonated" in people's minds, confirming certain pre-existing beliefs and drawing upon local knowledge about what the political party did in the space of reality. *El Candidato* operated in a cues-based model for viewers where the *telenovela* proposed shortcuts using links, associations, connectors and inferences impacting the real world through "vivid images, emotion-evoking music, humor, negativity and other non-substantive elements of a message."<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The *telenovela El Candidato* did not elect Vicente Fox *per se* but it was a very powerful media vehicle that certainly helped him. Although there were suspicions from the begin-

68 Iyengar, Shanto and Valentino, Nicholas A. (2000). "Who Says What? Source Credibility as a Mediator of Campaign Advertising." In *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality*. Lupia, Arthur, McCubbins, Mathew D., Popkin, Samuel L. (eds). Ed. Cambridge University Press. p. 109.

ning about the *telenovela*'s positive support of the PRI in the context of the real election, it turns out that in fact upon detailed analysis key scenes and episodes of *El Candidato*'s general framework, the opposite proved to be true. *TV-Azteca* and *El Candidato* together negatively framed the image of the PRI and its role in ruling the country for 71 years, which then helped to underline the necessity of change.

*El Candidato* visually explained the complexity of the social-political world even better than the politicians themselves or the press because its arguments are accompanied by images, angles, colors, music, emotions, etc. For some of those viewers-electors, the *telenovela* was an understandable guide to Mexican politics because the *telenovela* showed details related to what people thought about the PRI, politics, recent scandals and assassinations. The public mission of *TV-Azteca* and its nightly newscast *Hechos de la Noche* following *El Candidato* resulted in sensationalizing real public events with the private goal of supporting a president close to its own interests.

The viewers received fragmented knowledge about public affairs from *El Candidato* that they could have mostly learned through the television newscast. However, the importance of *El Candidato* and its influence on people's minds was that this fiction accompanied the real election and offered viewers a cognitive path of how to read reality and its tragic political events, while putting these events into images, recreating them with music and consequently creating emotions. This strategy to propose a myriad of permanent connections with other mental spaces and local people's knowledge was more fruitful than any direct message. The inferences evoked by *El Candidato* about politics resonated in people's minds and supported their suspicions and thoughts about what they thought about the political reality<sup>69</sup>.

The most important thing is that *telenovelas* find great resonance among viewers and echo people's real life experiences. People's necessity for stories allows viewers to accept the idea of blurred frontiers between public affairs and private interests.

69 *El Candidato* and the beginning of 2000 represented for television and the *telenovelas* an evolution of two new ways in which this genre could operate. Since 2000, television companies in Mexico have started co-producing international *telenovelas* (such as the *narco telenovelas*). Another way that *telenovelas* had evolved is creating a web series – a series of short stories to be released on the Internet, mobile or cellular phones. These productions are low-budget series that are taking advantage of improved video streaming. They are appealing to independent producers but they can also be distributed directly through platforms such as *You Tube*, *Vimeo*, *Blip*, and *Dailymotion*. These web series have a very quick narrative, few genres and short episodes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to MIT's Comparative Media Studies/Writing program for their warm welcome, intellectual stimulation and access to resources which helped make this article possible.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Articles in journals

- Alvarez, Ethel (1999). "Apuestan a una TV inteligente". *Reforma*. August. 18.
- Bruun Vaage, Margrethe (2013). "Fictional reliefs and reality checks". *Screen* 54:2. Summer. Pp. 218-237.
- Coulson, Seana and Oakley, Todd (2000). "Blending Basics". *Cognitive Linguistics* 11-3/4.
- Coulson, Seana and Oakley, Todd (2005). "Introduction". *Journal of Pragmatics*. Special Issue: Conceptual Blending Theory. No. 37. P. 1507.
- Fauconnier, Gilles and Turner, Mark (1995). "Conceptual Integration and Formal Expression". *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*. Vol. 10. Num. 3. Pp.183-202.
- Fillmore, Charles J. (1981) "Frame Semantics". *Linguistics in the morning calm; selected papers from SICOL, Seoul Korea*.
- Garay, Adriana (1999). "Detras de El Candidato". *Reforma*. September 19.
- Granados Chapa, Miguel Angel (1996). "Plaza Publica". *Reforma*. June 9. p. 7.
- Murray, Alan (2004). "Political Capital". *Wall Street Journal*, May 11.
- Olvera, Marco Antonio (1999). "Inician Campana el lunes". *Reforma*. 13 August

### Books

- Bergen K, Benjamin (2012). *Louder Than Words: The New Science of How The Mind Makes Meaning*. Basic Books. p. 296.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1979). *La distinction. Critique social du jugement*. Les editions des minuit. Paris. pp. 670.
- Ezrahi, Yaron (2012). *Imagined Democracies. Necessary Political Fictions*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 325.
- Fauconnier, Gilles (1984) *Espaces mentaux. Aspects de la construction de sens dans les langues naturelles*. Ed. Minuit. Paris. pp. 216.
- Fauconnier, Gilles (1997). *Mappings in Thought and Language*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. pp. 205.
- Garcia Rubio, Claudia I. (2008). *Para entender la television en*

*Mexico: Un analisis que decifra la pantalla*. Ed. Fragua San Pablo. pp. 399.

- Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and it Challenge to Western Thought*. Basic Books. pp. 624.
- Miro V, Juan Jose (1997). *La television y el poder politico en Mexico*. Ed. Diana. Pp. 267.
- Moreno, Alejandro (2003). *El votante mexicano: Democracia, actitudes politicas y conducta electoral*. Ed. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp.
- Vermeule, Blakey (2010). *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters? The Johns Hopkins University Press*. Baltimore. Pp. 273.
- Walton, Kendall (1993). *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Ed. Harvard University Press. Cambridge. Pp. 450.

### Contributions to books

- Caroll, Noel (1999). "Film, Emotion, and Genre" pp.21-4 in *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London.
- Currie, Gregory (1999). "Narrative Desire" pp. 183-199 in *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London.
- Donald, Merlin (2012). "An Evolutionary Approach to Culture: Implications for the Study of the Axial Age". Ch. 3 pp. 47-76 in *The Axial Ages and Its Consequences*. Robert N Bellah and Hans Joas (eds). Ed. Belknap Press.
- Grodal, Torben (1999). "Emotions and Narrative Patterns" pp. 127-145 in *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London.
- Hall, Stuart (1980). "Encoding/Decoding" in *Culture. Media. Language*. Stuart Hall *et al* (eds). London/Birmingham: Hutchinson/CCCS.
- Iyengar, Shanto and Valentino, Nicholas A. (2000). "Who Says What? Source Credibility as a Mediator of Campaign Advertising" pp. 108-129 in *Elements of Reason, Cognition, Choice, and the bounds of Rationality*. Lupia, Arthur, McCubbins, Mathew D., Popkin, Samuel L. (eds). Cambridge University Press.
- Kenton T., Wilkinson, (2008). "Democracy Sponsored by Nafta?. Mexican Television in the Free Trade Era" Ch. 10 p. 210 in *Negotiating Democracy*. Blankson, Isaac A.; Murphy, Patrick D (eds). SUNY Press.

Lawson, Chappell (2004). "Television Coverage, Vote Choice, and the 2000 Campaign" pp. 187-209 in *Mexico's Pivotal Democratic Election*. Dominguez, Jorge I and Lawson, Chappell (eds). Stanford University Press. Center for US-Mexican Studies.

Plantinga, Carl and Smith M, Greg. (1999). "Introduction," pp. 1-17 in *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London.

Sweetser, Eve and Fauconnier, Gilles (1996). "Cognitive Links and Domains: Basic Aspects of Mental Space Theory." Pp in *Spaces, Worlds and Grammar*. Gilles Fauconnier and Eve Sweettser (eds). The University of Chicago Press.

Tan, S. H. Ed and Frijda, Nico. (1999). "Sentiment in Film Viewing" pp. 48-64 in *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*. Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (eds). The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London.

### Electronic media

Varona Limia, Arnaldo (1999). "America Latina: las telenovelas que nos unen". *Letraria. Revista de los escritores hispano-americanos en Internet*. No. 80. 18 October.

### Unpublished works

Abarca Torres, Ivan (2011). *Construction de la fiction et la réalité dans l'image et le discours politique : Analyse de la telenovela El Candidato et la campagne présidentielle mexicaine en 2000*. PhD dissertation. Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Paris, France. Pp. 666.

### TV SERIES AND FILMS CITED

**Series:** *The Sopranos* (1999-2007)

**Films:** *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)