Perceiving that the cultural transformations generated by the latest technologies and by changes in symbolic production and circulation were not the exclusive responsibility of the communications media induced a search for more comprehensive notions. As the new processes were associated with urban growth, it was thought that the city could become the unity that would give coherence and analytical consistency to the studies.

Undoubtedly, urban expansion is one of the causes that intensified cultural hybridization. What does it mean for Latin American cultures that countries that had about 10 percent of their population in the cities at the beginning of the century now concentrate 60 to 70 percent in urban agglomerations? We have gone from societies dispersed in thousands of peasant communities with traditional, local, and homogeneous cultures – in some regions, with strong indigenous roots, with little communication with the rest of each nation – to a largely urban scheme with a heterogeneous symbolic offering renewed by a constant interaction of the local with national and transnational networks of communication.

Manuel Castells already observed in his book *La cuestión urbana* that the dizzying development of cities, in making visible under this name multiple dimensions of social change, made it comfortable to attribute to them the responsibility of vaster processes (Castells, 1973: 93). Something similar occurred to what happened with the mass media. The megalopolis was accused of engendering anonymity; it was imagined that neighborhoods produce solidarity, the suburbs crime, and that green spaces relax . . .
Urban ideologies attributed to one aspect of the transformation, produced by the intercrossing of many forces of modernity, the “explanation” of all its knots and crises. Since that book by Castells, much evidence has accumulated showing that “urban society” is not sharply opposed to the “rural world” and that the predominance of secondary relations over primary ones and of heterogeneity over homogeneity (or the opposite, according to the school) is not due only to the population concentration in the cities.

The urbanization predominant in contemporary societies is intertwined with serialization and anonymity in production, with restructurings of immaterial communication (from mass media to the telematic) that modify the connections between the private and public. How can we explain the fact that many changes in thinking and taste in urban life coincide with those in the peasantry, if not because the commercial interactions of the latter with the cities and the reception of electronic media in rural houses connects them daily with modern innovations?

Inversely, living in a big city does not imply becoming dissolved in the massive and the anonymous. The violence and public insecurity, the incomprehensibility of the city (who knows all the neighborhoods of a capital city?), lead us to search for selective forms of sociability in domestic intimacy and in trusting encounters. Popular groups seldom leave their spaces, whether peripheral or centrally located; middle- and upper-class sectors increase the bars on their windows and close and privatize the streets of their neighborhoods. For everyone radio and television, and for some the computer connected to basic services, bring them information and entertainment at home.

Living in cities, writes Norbert Lechner in his study on daily life in Santiago (1982), has become “isolating a space of one’s own.” In contrast to what Habermas observed in early periods of modernity, the public sphere is no longer the place of rational participation from which the social order is determined. It was like that, in part, in Latin America during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. It is enough to record the role of the “press, theater, and the patrician salons in conformity with a Creole elite”; first for restricted sectors, then broader ones, liberalism assumed that the public will should be constituted as “the result of the discussion and publicity of individual opinions” (Lechner, 1982: Part 2, 73–4).

Studies of the formation of popular neighborhoods in Buenos Aires in the first half of the century recorded that the microsocial structures of urbanism – the club, the café, the neighborhood society, the library, the political committee – organized the identity of the migrants and Creoles by linking immediate life with the global transformations that were being sought by society and the state. Reading and sports, militancy and neighborhood sociability were united in a utopian continuity with national political movements (Gutiérrez and Romero, 1985).

This is coming to an end, partly due to changes in the staging of politics; I am referring to the mix of bureaucratization and “mass mediatization.” The masses, called upon since the 1960s to express themselves in the streets and to form unions, were being subordinated in many cases to bureaucratic formations. The last decade presents frequent caricatures of that movement: populist leaderships without economic
growth and without surplus to distribute, end up overwhelmed by a perverse mixture of reconversion and recession and sign tragic pacts with the speculators of the economy (Alan García in Peru, Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela, Carlos Menem in Argentina). The massive use of the city for political theatricalization is reduced; economic measures and requests for the collaboration of the people are announced on television. Marches and rallies in streets and squares are occasional or have minor effect. In the three countries cited, as in others, public demonstrations generated by the impoverishment of the majority sometimes adopt the form of disarticulated explosions, attacks on shops and supermarkets, on the margin of the organic paths to political representation.

The city’s loss of meaning is in direct relation to the difficulties of political parties and unions in calling people to collective tasks that do not produce income or are of doubtful economic gain. The lesser visibility of macrosocial structures, their subordination to nonmaterial and different circuits of communication that mediatize personal and group interactions, is one of the causes for the decline in the credibility of all-encompassing social movements, such as the parties that concentrated the entirety of labor demands and civic representation. The emergence of multiple demands, enlarged in part by the growth of cultural protests and those relating to the quality of life, raises a diversified spectrum of organizations to speak for them: urban, ethnic, youth, feminist, consumer, ecological movements, and so on. Social mobilization, in the same way as the structure of the city, is fragmented in processes that are more and more difficult to totalize.

The efficacy of these movements depends, in turn, on the reorganization of the public space. Their actions have a low impact when they are limited to using traditional forms of communication (oral, of artisanal production, or in written texts that circulate from person to person). Their power grows if they act in mass networks: not only the urban presence of a demonstration of one or two hundred thousand persons, but – even more – their capacity to interfere with the normal functioning of a city and find support, for that very reason, in the electronic information media. Then, sometimes, the sense of the urban is restored and the massive ceases to be a vertical system of diffusion to become a larger expression of local powers, a complementing of the fragments.

At a time when the city or the public sphere is occupied by actors that technically calculate their decisions and technobureaucratically organize the attention to the demands, according to criteria of revenue and efficiency, polemical subjectivity – or simply subjectivity – retreats to the private sphere. The market reorders the public world as a stage for consumption and dramatization of the signs of status. The streets are saturated with cars, people rushing to fulfill work obligations or to a programmed recreation activity, almost always according to its economic yield.

A separate organization of “free time,” which turns it into a prolongation of work and money, contributes to this reformulation of the public. From working breakfasts to work, to business lunches, to work, to seeing what is on television at home, and some days to socially productive dinners. The free time of the popular sectors, compelled by underemployment and wage deterioration, is even less free in having to be busy with a second or third job, or in looking for them.
Collective identities find their constitutive stage less and less in the city and in its history, whether distant or recent. Information about unforeseen social vicissitudes is received in the home and commented upon among family or with close friends. Almost all sociability, and reflection about it, is concentrated in intimate exchanges. Since information on price increases, what the governor did, and even the accidents that happened the previous day in our own city reach us through the media, these become the dominant constituents of the “public” meaning of the city, those that simulate integrating a disintegrated imaginary urban sphere.

Although this is the trend, it would be unjust not to point out that sometimes the mass media also contribute to overcoming fragmentation. To the degree they inform us about the common experiences of urban life—social conflicts, pollution, which streets have traffic jams at what hours—they establish networks of communication and make it possible to apprehend the social, collective meaning of what happens in the city. On a broader scale, it may be affirmed that radio and television, in placing in relation to each other diverse historical, ethnic, and regional patrimonies and diffusing them massively, coordinate the multiple temporalities of different spectators.

The investigations of these processes should articulate the integrating and disintegrating effects of television with other processes of unification and atomization generated by the recent changes in urban development and the economic crisis. The groups that get together now and then to analyze collective questions—parents at school, workers at their workplace, neighborhood organizations—tend to act and think as self-referential and often sectored groups because economic pressure forces them down the economic ladder. This has been studied chiefly by sociologists in the southern cone, where military dictatorships suspended political parties, unions, and other mechanisms of grouping, mobilization, and collective cooperation. The repression attempted to reshape the public space by reducing social participation to the insertion of each individual in the benefits of consumption and financial speculation. Up to a point, the media became the great mediators and mediatizers, and therefore substitutes for other collective interactions.

The dictatorships made this transformation more radical. But in the last decade, when other Latin American governments have shared this neoconservative policy, its effects have been generalized. “To appear in public” is today to be seen by many people scattered in front of the family television set or reading the newspaper in their home. Political leaders and intellectuals accentuate their conditions as theatrical actors, their messages are distributed if they are “news,” and “public opinion” is something measurable by opinion polls. The citizen becomes a client, a “public consumer.”

“Urban culture” is restructured by giving up its leading role in the public space to electronic technologies. Given that almost everything in the city “happens” thanks to the fact that the media say so, and in seeming to occur the way the media want it to, there is an accentuation of social mediatization and of the weight of the stagings, and political actions are constituted as so many images of the political. Thus Eliseo Verón (1985), pushing things to the extreme, asserts that participating today means having relations with an “audiovisual democracy” in which the real is produced by the images created in the media.
I would put it in somewhat different terms. More than an absolute substitution of urban life by the audiovisual media, I perceive a *game of echoes*. The commercial advertising and political slogans that we see on television are those that we reencounter in the streets, and vice versa: the ones are echoed in the others. To this circularity of the communicational and the urban are subordinated the testimonies of history and the public meaning constructed in longtime experiences.

**Historical Memory and Urban Conflicts**

From mass culture to technoculture, from urban space to teleparticipation. In observing this trend, we run the risk of relapsing into the linear historical perspective and suggesting that communicational technologies *substitute for* the inheritance of the past and public interactions.

It is necessary to reintroduce the question of the modern and postmodern uses of history. I am going to do so with the most challenging and apparently most solemn reference: monuments. What meaning do they conserve or renew in the midst of the transformations of the city and in competition with transitory phenomena like advertising, graffiti, and political demonstrations?

There was a time when monuments, along with schools and museums, were a legitimizing stage of the traditional cultured. Their gigantic size or distinguished placement contributed to exalting them. “Why are there no statues in short sleeves?” the Argentine television program *La noticia rebelde* asked the architect Osvaldo Giesso, director of the Cultural Center of the city of Buenos Aires. To give a long, drawn-out response would require considering the statues together with the rhetoric of textbooks, the ritualism of civic ceremonies, and the other self-consecrating liturgies of power. One would also have to analyze how the monumentalist aesthetic that governs most historic spaces in Latin America was initiated as an expression of authoritarian social systems in the pre-Columbian world. Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansionism was superimposed on them because of the need to compete with the grandiloquence of indigenous architecture by means of neoclassical giganticism and baroque exuberance. Finally, it would be necessary to analyze how the processes of independence and construction of our nations engendered enormous buildings and murals, portraits of heroes, and calendars of historical events, all designed to establish an iconography representative of the size of the utopias.

What do monuments claim to say within contemporary urban symbolism? In revolutionary processes with broad popular participation, public rites and monumental constructions express the historic impulse of mass movements. They are part of the struggle for a new visual culture in the midst of the stubborn persistence of signs of the old order, such as occurred with the first postrevolutionary Mexican muralism and with Russian graphic art in the twenties and Cuban graphic art in the sixties. But when the new movement becomes the system, the projects for change follow the route of bureaucratic planning more than that of participative mobilization. When social organization is stabilized, ritualism becomes sclerotic.
To show the type of tensions that are established between historical memory and the visual scheme of modern cities, I will analyze a group of monuments. It is a small selection from the abundant documentation on monuments of Mexico assembled by Paolo Gori and Helen Escobedo (1989). I am going to begin with a group of sculptures that represent the founding of Tenochtitlán and are located a short distance from the Zócalo in Mexico City.

These examples suffice to show the changes the most solid commemorations of patrimony suffer. Monuments often contain several styles and references to diverse historical and artistic periods. Another hybridization is added later in interacting with urban growth, advertising, graffiti, and modern social movements. The iconography of national traditions (Juárez) is used as a resource for struggling against those who, in the name of other traditions (those of Catholicism that condemn abortion), oppose modernity.

These images suggest diverse ways in which traditions and the monuments that consecrate them are reutilized today. Certain heroes of the past survive in the middle of conflicts that unfold in any modern city between systems of political and commercial signs, traffic signals, and social movements.

Modern development attempted to distribute objects and signs in specific places: commodities in current use, in shops; objects of the past, in history museums; those that claim to be valuable for their aesthetic meaning, in art museums. At the same time, the messages emitted by commodities, historical works, and artistic works, and those that indicate how to use them, circulate through schools and the mass media. A rigorous classification of things and of the languages that speak about them sustains the systematic organization of the social spaces in which they should be consumed. This order structures the life of consumers and prescribes behaviors and modes of perceiving that are appropriate for each situation. To be cultured in a modern city consists in knowing how to distinguish between what is purchased for use, what is commemorated, and what is enjoyed symbolically. The social system requires living in a compartmentalized way.

Nevertheless, urban life transgresses this order all the time. In the movement of the city, commercial interests are crossed with historical, aesthetic, and communicational ones. The semantic struggles to neutralize each other, to perturb the message of the others or change its meaning, and to subordinate the rest to its own logic are stagings of the conflicts between social forces: between the market, history, the state, advertising, and the popular struggle for survival.

While historical objects in museums are removed from history and their intrinsic meaning is frozen in an eternity where nothing will ever happen, monuments open to the urban dynamic facilitate the interaction of memory with change and the revitalization of heroes thanks to propaganda or transit: they continue struggling with the social movements that survive them. In Mexico’s museums, the heroes of independence are distinguished by their relation to those of the Reform and the revolution; in the street their meaning is renewed in dialoguing with present contradictions. Without display windows or guards to protect them, urban monuments are happily exposed to their being inserted into contemporary life by graffiti or a popular demonstration. Although sculptors resist abandoning the formulas of classical
realism in representing the past or making heroes in short sleeves, monuments are kept up-to-date by the “irreverences” of the citizens.

Graffiti, commercial posters, social and political demonstrations, monuments—languages that represent the main forces operating in the city. Monuments are almost always works with which political power consecrates the founding persons and events of the state. Commercial posters seek to synchronize daily life with the interests of economic power. Graffiti (like the posters and political events of the oppositions) express popular criticism of the imposed order. That is why the publicity announcements that hide or contradict the monuments, and the graffiti written over other graffiti, are so significant. At times the proliferation of announcements drowns out historical identity and dissolves memory in the anxious perception of the novelties that are incessantly renewed by advertising. On the other hand, the authors of spontaneous legends are saying that monuments are inadequate for expressing how the city moves. Is not the need to politically reinscribe monuments evidence of the distance between a state and a people, or between history and the present?

Decollecting

This difficulty in including what we earlier totalized under the formula “urban culture,” or with the notions of cultured, popular, and massive, presents the problem of whether the organization of culture can be explained by reference to collections of symbolic goods. The disarticulation of the urban also puts into doubt the possibility of cultural systems finding their key in the relations of the population with a certain type of territory and history that would, in a peculiar sense, prefigure the behaviors of each group. The next step in this analysis must be to work with the (combined) processes of decollecting and deterritorialization.

The formation of specialized collections of high art and folklore was a device in modern Europe, and later in Latin America, for ordering symbolic goods in separate groups and hierarchizing them. A certain type of paintings, music, and books belonged to those who were cultured, even though they did not have them in their houses and even though it was through access to museums, concert halls, and libraries. To know their order was already a way of possessing them that distinguished them from those who did not know how to relate to that order.

The history of art and literature was formed on the basis of collections that were housed in museums and libraries when these were buildings for keeping, exhibiting, and consulting collections. Today art museums exhibit Rembrandt and Bacon in one room, popular objects and industrial design in the following ones, and beyond those are happenings, performances, installations, and body art by artists who no longer believe in the works and refuse to produce collectible objects. Public libraries continue to exist in a more traditional mode, but any intellectual or student works much more in his or her private library, where books are mixed with journals, newspaper clippings, fragmentary bits of information that will be moved often from one shelf to another and whose use requires them to be spread out on several tables and on the floor. The situation of the cultural worker today is what Benjamin
glimpsed in that pioneering text in which he described the sensations of moving and unpacking his library among the disorder of the boxes, “the floor strewn with scattered papers,” the loss of the order that connected those objects with a history of knowledge, making him feel that the mania of collecting “is no longer of our time” (Benjamin, 1969: 59–66).

On the other hand, there was a repertory of folklore, of the objects of peoples or classes that had different customs and therefore other collections. Folklore was born from collecting, as we saw in an earlier chapter. It was formed when collectors and folklorists moved to archaic societies, investigated and preserved the containers used for cooking, the clothing, and the masks used in ritual dancing, and then gathered them together in museums. The containers, masks, and textiles are now found equalized under the name of “handicrafts” in urban markets. If we want to buy the best designs, we no longer go to the mountains or the forests where the Indians who produce them live, because the pieces of diverse ethnic groups are mixed together in shops in the cities.

The aggregate of works and messages that used to structure visual culture and provide the grammar of reading the city diminished their efficacy in the urban space as well. There is no homogeneous architectural system and the distinguishing profiles of neighborhoods are being lost. The lack of urban regulation, and the cultural hybridity of buildings and users intermix styles from various eras in a single street. The interaction of the monuments with advertising and political messages situates the organization of memory and visual order in heteroclite networks.

The agony of collections is the clearest symptom of how the classifications that used to distinguish the cultured from the popular, and both from the massive, are disappearing. Cultures no longer are grouped in fixed and stable wholes, and therefore the possibility disappears of being cultured by knowing the repertory of “the great works,” or of being popular because one manages the meaning of the objects and messages produced by a more or less closed community (an ethnic group, a neighborhood, a class). Now these collections renew their composition and their hierarchy with the fashions; they are crossed all the time and, to top it all off, each user can make his or her own collection. The technologies of reproduction permit each person to set up a repertory of records and cassettes in his or her home that combine the cultured with the popular, including those who already do this in the structure of their works: Piazzola, who mixes the tango with jazz and classical music, and Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque, who appropriate at once the experimentation of the concrete poets, Afro-Brazilian traditions, and post-Webernian musical experimentation.

In addition, there is a proliferation of reproduction devices that we cannot define as either cultured or popular. In them collections are lost, and images and contexts – along with the semantic and historical references that used to bind together their meanings – are destructed.

Photocopiers. Books are unbound; anthologies approach authors incapable of being dealt with in symposia; new bindings group together chapters of diverse volumes following the logic not of intellectual production but of their uses: to prepare for an exam, to follow the tastes of a professor, to pursue sinuous itineraries absent in the routine classifications of bookstores and libraries. This fragmentary relation with
books leads us to lose the structure in which the chapters are inserted; we descend, Monsiváis once wrote, into the “Xerox grade of reading.” It is also true that the freer handling of texts, their reduction to notes, as desacralized as the tape-recorded class – which sometimes never passes to the written page because it is transferred directly to the screen of a computer – induces more fluid links among the texts and among students and knowledge.

_Videocassette recorders_. One forms his or her personal collection by mixing football games and Fassbinder films, North American series, Brazilian soap operas, and a debate over the foreign debt – what the channels broadcast when we are watching them, when we are working, or when we are sleeping. The recording may be immediate or delayed and with the possibility of erasing, rerecording, and verifying how it turned out. The video recorder resembles television and the library, says Jean Franco: “it permits the juxtaposition of very different topics starting from an arbitrary system and directed to communities that transcend the limits between races, classes, and sexes” (1987: 56). In truth, the video recorder goes farther than the library. It recorders a series of traditional or modern oppositions: between the national and the foreign, leisure and work, news and entertainment, politics and fiction. It also intervenes in sociability by allowing us to not miss a social or family gathering because we are watching a program and by promoting networks for borrowing and exchanging cassettes.

_Videos_. This is the most intrinsically postmodern genre. Intergenre: it mixes music, image, and text. Transtemporal: it gathers together melodies and images of various epochs and freely cites deeds out of context; it takes up what was done by Magritte and Duchamp, but for mass audiences. Some works take advantage of the versatility of video to create works that are brief but dense and systematic: _Fotoromanza_ by Antonioni, _Thriller_ by John Landis, _All Night Long_ by Bob Rafelson, for example. But in most cases all action is given in fragments; it does not ask us to concentrate or to look for a continuity. There is no history to speak of. Not even art history or the media matter: images are plundered from everywhere and in any order. In a two-minute video, the German singer Falco summarizes the story of _The Black Vampire_ by Fritz Lang; Madonna dresses like Marilyn Monroe, copying the choreography of _Gentleman Prefer Blondes_ and the facial expressions of Betty Boop: “Those who remember love the homage and the nostalgia. Those who have no memory of it or who were not born yet also love it as their eyes follow the treat that is being sold to them as something brand-new” (McAllister, 1989: 21–3). There is no interest in indicating what is new and what comes from before. To be a good spectator one has to abandon oneself to the rhythm and enjoy the ephemeral sights. Even the videos that present a story downplay or ironize it by means of parodying montages and abrupt accelerations. This training in a fleeting perception of the real has had so much success that it is not limited to discotheques or a few entertainment programs on television; in the United States and Europe there are channels that broadcast them twenty-four hours a day. There are business, political, music, advertising, and educational videos that are replacing the business manual, the pamphlet, the theatrical spectacle, and the more or less reasoned staging of politics in electoral meetings. They are cold, indirect dramatizations that do not require the personal presence of
interlocutors. The world is seen as a discontinuous effervescence of images, art as fast food. This ready-to-think culture allows us to de-think historical events without worrying about understanding them. In one of his films Woody Allen made fun of what he had understood by speed-reading War and Peace: “It talks about Russia,” he concluded. Le Nouvel Observateur says seriously that it finds a new way of reinterpreting the student revolts of 1968 using this aesthetic: they were a “revolt clip: hot montage of shock images, rupture of rhythm, cutoff ending” (1987: 43).

Video games. These are like the participative version of videos. When they take the place of movies – not only in the public’s free time but in the space of the movie theaters that close for lack of viewers – the operation of cultural displacement is clear. From contemporary cinema they take the most violent aspects: war scenes, car and motorcycle races, karate and boxing matches. They familiarize directly with the sensuality and efficacy of technology; they provide a mirror-screen where power itself and the fascination of battling with the big forces of the world are staged by taking advantage of the latest techniques and without the risk of direct confrontations. They dematerialize and disembody danger, giving us only the pleasure of winning out over others, or the possibility, in being defeated, that the only thing lost is coins in a machine.

As studies on the effects of television established long ago, these new technological resources are not neutral, nor are they omnipotent. Their simple formal innovation implies cultural changes, but the final sign depends on the uses different actors assign to them. We cite them here because they crack the orders that used to classify and distinguish cultural traditions; they weaken historical meaning and the macrostructural conceptions to the benefit of intense and sporadic relations with isolated objects, with their signs and images. Some postmodern theorists argue that this predominance of immediate and dehistoricized relations is coherent with the collapse of the great metaphysical narratives.

Actually, there are no reasons to lament the decomposition of rigid collections that, by separating the cultured, the popular, and the massive, promoted inequalities. Nor do we think that there are prospects for restoring the classic order of modernity. We see in the irreverent crossings occasions for relativizing religious, political, national, ethnic, and artistic fundamentalisms that absolutize certain patrimonies and discriminate against the rest. But we wonder if extreme discontinuity as a perceptive habit, the diminution of opportunities for understanding the reellation of the subsistent meanings of some traditions and for intervening in their change, do not reinforce the unconsulted power of those who continue to be concerned with understanding and managing the great networks of objects and meanings; the transnationals and the states.

Among the decollecting and dehierarchizing strategies of the cultural technologies must be included the existing asymmetry in production and use between the central and the dependent countries and between consumers of different classes within the same society. The possibilities for taking advantage of technological innovations and adapting them to their own productive and communicational needs are unequal in the central countries – generators of inventions, with high investment in renovating their industries, goods, and services – and in Latin America, where
investments are frozen because of the debt and austerity policies, where scientists and technicians work with ridiculous budgets or have to emigrate, and where control of the more modern cultural media is highly concentrated and depends a great deal on outside programming.

Of course it is not a question of returning to the paranoid denunciations and conspiratorial conceptions of history that accused the modernization of quotidian and mass culture of being an instrument of the powerful in order to better exploit. The question is to understand how the dynamic itself of technological development remodels society and coincides with or contradicts social movements. There are different kinds of technologies, each with various possibilities for development and articulation with the others. There are social sectors with diverse cultural capitals and dispositions for appropriating them with different meanings: decollecting and hybridization are not the same for the adolescents from the popular classes who go to public video-game parlors as they are for those from the middle and upper classes who have the games at home. The meanings of the technologies are constructed according to the ways they are institutionalized and socialized.

The technological remodeling of social practices does not always contradict traditional cultures and modern arts. It has extended, for example, the use of patrimonial goods and the field of creativity. Just as video games trivialize historical battles and some videos trivialize experimental art trends, computers and other uses of video make it easy to obtain data, visualize graphics and innovate them, simulate the use of pieces and information, and reduce the distance between conception and execution, knowledge and application, information and decision. This multiple appropriation of cultural patrimonies opens up original possibilities for experimentation and communication with democratizing uses, as is appreciated in the use some popular movements make of video.

But new technologies not only promote creativity and innovation; they also reproduce known structures. The three most frequent uses of video – consumption of commercial movies, porno films, and the recording of family events – repeat audiovisual practices initiated by photography and the Super 8. On the other hand, video art – explored mainly by painters, musicians, and poets – reaffirms the difference and the hermetism in a way similar to that of art galleries and movie clubs.

The coexistence of these contradictory uses reveals that the interactions of new technologies with previous culture makes them part of a much bigger project than the one they unleashed or the one they manage. One of these changes of long standing that technological intervention makes more evident is the reorganization of the links between groups and symbolic systems; the decollections and hybridizations no longer permit a rigid linking of social classes to cultural strata. Although many works remain within the minority or popular circuits for which they were made, the prevailing trend is for all sectors to mix into their tastes objects whose points of origin were previously separated. I do not want to say that this more fluid and complex circulation has evaporated class differences. I am only saying that the reorganization of the cultural stagings and the constant crossings of identities require that we ask ourselves in a different way about the orders that systematize the material and symbolic relations among groups.
Deterritorializing

The most radical inquiries into what it means to be entering and leaving modernity are by those who assume the tensions between deterritorialization and reterritorialization. With this I am referring to two processes: the loss of the “natural” relation of culture to geographical and social territories and, at the same time, certain relative, partial territorial relocalizations of old and new symbolic productions.

In order to document this transformation of contemporary cultures I will analyze first the transnationalization of symbolic markets and migrations. Then I propose to explore the aesthetic meaning of this change by following the strategies of some impure arts.

1. There was a method of associating the popular with the national that, as we noted in earlier chapters, nourished the modernization of Latin American cultures. Carried out first in the form of colonial domination, then as industrialization and urbanization under metropolitan models, modernity seemed to be organized in politicoeconomic and cultural antagonisms: colonizers versus colonized, cosmopolitanism versus nationalism. The last pair of opposites was the one handled by dependency theory, according to which everything was explained by the confrontation between imperialism and national popular cultures.

Studies of economic and cultural imperialism served to get to know some devices used by the international centers of scientific, artistic, and communicational production that conditioned, and still condition, our development. But this model is insufficient for understanding current power relations. It does not explain the planetary functioning of an industrial, technological, financial, and cultural system whose headquarters is not in a single nation but in a dense network of economic and ideological structures. Nor does it take into account the need of metropolitan nations to make their borders flexible and integrate their economies and their educational, technological, and cultural systems, as is occurring in Europe and North America.

The persistent inequality between what the dependency theorists called the First and the Third Worlds maintains with relative effect some of their postulates. But although the decisions and benefits of the exchanges may be concentrated in the bourgeoisie of the metropolises, new processes make the asymmetry more complex: the decentralization of corporations, the planetary simultaneity of information, and the adaptation of certain international forms of knowledge and images to the knowledge and habits of each community. The delocalization of symbolic products by electronics and telematics, and the use of satellites and computers in cultural diffusion, also impede our continuing to see the confrontations of peripheral countries as frontal combats with geographically defined nations.

The Manichaeism of those oppositions becomes even less realistic in the eighties and nineties when several dependent countries are registering a notable increase in their cultural exports. In Brazil, the advance of massification and industrialization of culture did not imply – contrary to what tended to be said – a greater dependency on foreign production. Statistics reveal that in the last several years its cinematography and the proportion of national films on the screens grew: from 13.9 percent in 1971
to 35 percent in 1982. Books by Brazilian authors, which accounted for 54 percent of publishing production in 1973, rose to 70 percent in 1981. Also, more national records and cassettes are listened to, while imported music declines. In 1972, 60 percent of television programming was foreign; in 1983, it fell to 30 percent. At the same time that this trend toward nationalization and autonomy is occurring in cultural production, Brazil is becoming a very active agent in the Latin American market of symbolic goods by exporting soap operas. As it also succeeds in broadly penetrating the central countries, it became the seventh world producer of television and advertising, and the sixth in records. Renato Ortiz, from whom I take these data, concludes that they went “from defense of the national popular to exportation of the international popular” (1988: 182–206).

Although this trend does not occur in the same way in all Latin American countries, there are similar aspects in those of more modern cultural development that reestablish the articulations between the national and the foreign. Such changes do not eliminate the question of how distinct classes benefit from and are represented in the culture produced in each country, but the radical alteration of the stagings of production and consumption – as well as the character of the goods that are presented – questions the “natural” association of the popular with the national and the equally a priori opposition with the international.

2. Multidirectional migrations are the other factor that relativizes the binary and polar paradigm in the analysis of intercultural relations. Latin American internationalization is accentuated in the last few decades, when migrations not only include writers, artists, and exiled politicians as happened since last century, but settlers from all social layers. How do we include in the one-directional schema of imperialist domination the new flows of cultural circulation opened up by the transplants of Latin Americans to the United States and Europe, from the least-developed countries to the most prosperous ones of our continent, from poor regions to urban centers? Are there two million South Americans who, according to the most conservative statistics, left Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay in the seventies because of ideological persecution and economic suffering? It is not accidental that the most innovative reflection on deterritorialization is unfolding in the principal area of migrations on the continent – the border between Mexico and the United States.

From both sides of that border, intercultural movements show their painful face: the underemployment and uprooting of peasants and indigenous people who had to leave their lands in order to survive. But a very dynamic cultural production is also growing there. If there are more than 250 Spanish-language radio and television stations in the United States, more than fifteen hundred publications in Spanish, and a high interest in Latin American literature and music, it is not only because there is a market of twenty million “Hispanics,” or 8 percent of the US population (38 percent in New Mexico, 25 percent in Texas, and 23 percent in California). It is also due to the fact that so-called Latin culture produces films like *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*, the songs of Rubén Blades and Los Lobos, aesthetically and culturally advanced theaters like that of Luis Valdez, and visual artists whose quality and aptitude for making popular culture interact with modern and postmodern symbolism incorporates them into the North American mainstream.
Whoever is familiar with these artistic movements knows that many are rooted in the everyday experiences of the popular sectors. So that no doubts remain about the transclass extent of the phenomenon of deterritorialization, it is useful to refer to the anthropological investigations on migrants. Roger Rouse studied the inhabitants of Aguililla, a rural town in southwestern Michoacán, apparently only accessible by a dirt road. Its two main activities continue to be agriculture and raising livestock for subsistence, but the emigration that began in the forties was such an incentive that almost all families there now have members who live or have lived abroad. The declining local economy is sustained by the flow of dollars sent from California, especially from Redwood City, that nucleus of microelectronics and post-industrial North American culture in Silicon Valley, where the Michoacanos work as laborers and in services. Most stay for brief periods in the United States, and those who remain longer maintain constant relations with their place of origin. There are so many outside of Aguililla, and so frequent are their connections with those who remain there, that one can no longer conceive of the two wholes as separate communities:

Through the constant migration back and forth and the growing use of telephones, the residents of Aguililla tend to be reproducing their links with people that are two thousand miles away as actively as they maintain their relations with their immediate neighbors. Still more, and more generally, through the continuous circulation of people, money, commodities, and information, the diverse settlements have intermingled with such force that they are probably better understood as forming only one community dispersed in a variety of places. (Rouse, 1988: 1–2)

Two conventional notions of social theory collapse in the face of these “crossed economies, meaning systems that intersect, and fragmented personalities.” One of these is that of “community,” employed both for isolated peasant populations and for expressing the abstract cohesion of a compact national state, in both cases definable by relation to a specific territory. It was assumed that the links between the members of those communities would be more intense inside than outside of their space, and that the members treat the community as the principal medium to which they adjust their actions. The second image is the one that opposes center and periphery, also an “abstract expression of an idealized imperial system,” in which the gradations of power and wealth would be distributed concentrically: most in the center and a progressive decrease as we move toward surrounding zones. The world functions less and less in this way, says Rouse; we need “an alternative cartography of social space” based instead on the notions of “circuit” and “border.”

It also should not be assumed, he adds, that this reordering only includes those on the margins. He notes a similar disarticulation in the economy of the United States, previously dominated by autonomous blocks of capital. In the central area of Los Angeles, 75 percent of the buildings now belong to foreign capital; in all urban centers combined, 40 percent of the population consists of ethnic minorities from Asia and Latin America, and “it is calculated that this number will approach 60 percent in the year 2010” (Rouse, 1988: 2). There is an “implosion of the third world in the first,” according to Renato Rosaldo (n.d.: 9); “the notion of an
authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe is no longer sustain-
able” in either of these two worlds, “except perhaps as a ‘useful fiction’ or a reveal-
ing distortion” (Rosaldo, 1989: 217).

When, in the last few years of his life, Michel de Certeau taught in San Diego, he
used to say that in California the mix of immigrants from Mexico, Colombia,
Norway, Russia, Italy, and the eastern United States made him think that “life
consists of constantly crossing borders.” Roles are taken and changed with the same
versatility as cars and houses:

This mobility rests on the postulate that one is not identified either by birth, by family,
by professional status, by friendships or love relationships, or by property. It seems as if
all identity defined by status and place (of origin, of work, of residence, etc.) were
reduced, if not swept away, by the velocity of all movements. It is known that there is
no identity document in the United States; it is replaced by the driver’s license and the
credit card, that is, by the capacity to cross space and by participation in a game of
fiduciary contracts between North American citizens. (Certeau, 1981: 10–18)

During the two periods during which I studied the intercultural conflicts on the
Mexican side of the border, in Tijuana, in 1985 and 1988, several times I thought
that this city is, along with New York, one of the biggest laboratories of post-
modernity. In 1950 it had no more than sixty thousand inhabitants; today there are
more than a million, with migrants from almost all regions of Mexico (mainly
Oaxaca, Puebla, Michoacán, and the Federal District) who have settled there over
the years. Some go daily into the United States to work; others cross the border
during the planting and harvesting seasons. Even those who stay in Tijuana are
linked to commercial exchanges between the two countries, to North American
maquiladoras located on the Mexican border, or to tourist services for the three or
four million people from the United States who arrive in this city every year.

From the beginning of this century until fifteen years ago, Tijuana was known for
a casino (abolished during the Cárdenas government), cabarets, dance halls, and
liquor stores where North Americans came to elude their country’s prohibitions on
sex, gambling, and alcohol. The recent installation of factories, modern hotels,
cultural centers, and access to wide-ranging international information has made it
into a modern, contradictory, cosmopolitan city with a strong definition of itself.

In interviews we did of primary, secondary, and university students, and of artists
and cultural promoters from all social layers, there was no theme more central for
their self-definition than border life and intercultural contacts. One of our research
techniques was to ask them to name the most representative places of life and
culture in Tijuana in order to photograph them later; we also took pictures of
other scenes that seemed to condense the city’s meaning (publicity posters, casual
encounters, graffiti) and selected fifty photos to show to fourteen groups from
various economic and cultural levels. Two-thirds of the images they judged most
representative of the city, and about which they spoke with the greatest emphasis,
were those that linked Tijuana with what lies beyond it: Revolution Avenue, its
shops and tourist centers, the minaret that bears witness to where the casino was,
the parabolic antennas, the legal and illegal passages on the border, the neighborhoods where those from different parts of the country are concentrated, the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, “lord of the émigrés,” to whom they go to ask that he arrange their “papers” or to thank him for their not having been caught by la migra (or Immigration).

The multicultural character of the city is expressed in the use of Spanish, English, and also indigenous languages in the neighborhoods and maquiladoras, or among those who sell crafts downtown. This pluralism diminishes when we move from private interactions to public languages, that is, those of radio, television, and urban advertising, where English and Spanish predominate and coexist “naturally.”

Along with the poster that recommends the disco club and the radio station that plays “rock in your language,” another announces a Mexican liqueur in English. Music and alcoholic beverages – two symbols of Tijuana – coexist under this linguistic duality. “The other choice” is explicitly the liqueur, but the contiguity of the messages makes it possible that it also refers to rock in Spanish. The ambivalence of the image, which the interviewees considered analogous to life in the city, also allows us to conclude – following the order of reading – that the other choice is English.

The uncertainty generated by the bilingual, bicultural, and binational oscillations has its equivalence in the relations with its own history. Some of the photos were chosen precisely because they allude to the simulated character of a good portion of Tijuana culture. The Hot Water Tower, burned in the 1960s with the intention of forgetting the casino it represented, was rebuilt a few years ago and now is exhibited with pride on magazine covers and in advertising; but in pointing out to the interviewees that the current tower is in a different location than the original one, they argue that the change is a way of displacing and relocating the past.

On several corners of Revolution Avenue there are zebras. In reality they are painted burros. They are there so that North American tourists can be photographed with a landscape behind them in which images from various regions of Mexico are crowded together: volcanoes, Aztec figures, cacti, the eagle with the serpent. “Faced with the lack of other types of things, as there are in the south where there are pyramids, there is none of that here . . . as if something had to be invented for the gringos,” they said in one of the groups. In another group, they pointed out that “it also refers to the myth that North Americans bring with them, that it has something to do with crossing the border into the past, into the wilderness, into the idea of being able to ride horseback.”

One interviewee told us: “The wire that separates Mexico from the United States could be the main monument of culture on the border.”

In arriving at the beach “the line” falls and leaves a transit zone, used at times by undocumented migrants. Every Sunday the fragmented families on both sides of the border gather for picnics.

Where the borders move, they can be rigid or fallen; where buildings are evoked in another place than the one they represent, every day the spectacular invention of the city itself is renewed and expanded. The simulacrum comes to be a central category of culture. Not only is the “authentic” relativized. The obvious, ostentatious illusion – like the zebras that everyone knows are fake or the hiding games of
illegal migrants that are “tolerated” by the United States police – becomes a re-source for defining identity and communicating with others.

To these hybrid and simulated products, border artists and writers add their own intercultural laboratory. The following is from a radio interview with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, editor of the bilingual journal La línea quebrada/The broken line, with offices in Tijuana and San Diego:

REPORTER: If you love our country so much, as you say you do, why do you live in California?
GÓMEZ-Peña: I am de-Mexicanizing myself in order to Mexicomprehend myself . . .
REPORTER: What do you consider yourself, then?
GÓMEZ-Peña: Post-Mexica, pre-Chicano, pan-Latino, land-crossed, Art American . . . it depends on the day of the week or the project in question.

Several Tijuana periodicals are dedicated to reworking the definitions of identity and culture taking the border experience as their starting point. La línea quebrada, which is the most radical, says that it expresses a generation that grew up “watching charro and science-fiction movies, listening to cumbias and Moody Blues songs, building altars and filming in Super 8, reading El Corno Emplumado and Art Forum.” Since they live in the interval, “in the crack between the two worlds,” and since they are “the ones who didn’t go because we didn’t fit, the ones who still don’t arrive or don’t know where to arrive,” they decide to assume all possible identities:

When they ask me my nationality or ethnic identity, I cannot respond with one word, since my “identity” has multiple repertories: I am Mexican but also Chicano and Latin American. On the border they call me “chilango” or “mexiquillo”; in the capital “pocho” or “norteno,” and in Europe “sudaca.” Anglo-Saxons call me “Hispanic” or “Latino,” and Germans have more than once confused me with being Turkish or Italian.

With a phrase that would please a migrant as much as a young rocker, Gómez-Peña explains that “our deepest generational feeling is that of the loss that arises from the departure.” But there are also things that they have gained: “a view of culture that is more experimental, that is, multifocal and tolerant” (Gómez-Peña, 1987: 3–5).

Other artists and writers from Tijuana question the euphemized view of the contradictions and the uprooting they perceive in the La línea quebrada group. They reject the celebration of the migrations often caused by poverty in the place from which people migrate, and which is repeated in their new destination. There is no lack of those who, despite not having been born in Tijuana, contest this parodic and detached insolence in the name of their fifteen or twenty years in the city: “people who have arrived recently and want to discover us and tell us who we are.”

Both in this polemic and in other manifestations of strong emotions in referring to the photos of Tijuana, we saw a complex movement that we would call reterritorialization. The same people who praise the city for being open and cosmopolitan
want to fix signs of identification and rituals that differentiate them from those who are just passing through, who are tourists, or . . . anthropologists curious to understand intercultural crossings.

The editors of the other Tijuana journal, *Esquina baja*, devoted a long time to explaining to us why they wanted, in addition to having an organ in which to express themselves,

to generate an audience of readers, a local journal of quality in all aspects, such as design and presentation . . . in order to counteract a bit that centrist trend that exists in the country, because what there is in the provinces does not succeed in transcending, and is minimized, if it does not first pass through the fine sieve of the Federal District.

We find something similar in the vehemence with which everyone rejected the “missionary” criteria for cultural activities favored by the central government. Against the national programs designed to “affirm Mexican identity” on the northern border, Baja Californians argue that they are as Mexican as the rest, though in a different way. About the “threat of North American cultural penetration” they say that, in spite of the geographic and communicational proximity to the United States, the daily commercial and cultural exchanges make them live inequality intensely and therefore have a less idealized image of those who receive a similar influence in the capital via television messages and imported consumer goods.

Deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In the exchanges of traditional symbols with international communications circuits, culture industries, and migrations, questions about identity and the national, the defense of sovereignty, and the unequal appropriation of knowledge and art do not disappear. The conflicts are not erased, as neoconservative postmodernism claims. They are placed in a different register, one that is multifocal and more tolerant, and the autonomy of each culture is rethought – sometimes – with smaller fundamentalist risks. Nevertheless, the chauvinist critiques of “those from the center” sometimes engender violent conflicts: acts of aggression against recently arrived migrants and discrimination in school and at work.

The intense crossings and the instability of traditions, bases of the valorizing opening, may also be – in conditions of labor competition – a source of prejudice and confrontation. Therefore, the analysis of the advantages or inconveniences of deterritorialization should not be reduced to the movements of ideas or cultural codes, as is frequently the case in the bibliography on postmodernity. Their meaning is also constructed in connection with social and economic practices, in struggles for local power, and in the competition to benefit from alliances with external powers.

**Oblique Powers**

This crossing of some postmodern transformations of the symbolic market and of everyday culture contributes to understanding the failure of certain ways of doing politics that are based on two principles of modernity: the autonomy of symbolic
processes and the democratic renewal of the cultured and the popular. Likewise, it can help us explain the generalized success of neoconservative politics and the lack of socializing or more democratic alternatives adapted to the level of technological development and the complexity of the social crisis. In addition to the economic advantages of the neoconservative groups, their action is facilitated by their having better captured the sociocultural meaning of the new structures of power.

Starting from what we have been analyzing, a key question returns: the cultural reorganization of power. It is a question of analyzing what the political consequences are of moving from a vertical and bipolar conception of sociopolitical relations to one that is decentered and multidetermined.

It is understandable that there is resistance to this displacement. The Manichaean and conspiratorial representations of power find partial justification in some contemporary processes. The central countries use technological innovations to accentuate the asymmetry and inequality between them and the dependent countries. The hegemonic classes take advantage of industrial reconversion to reduce workers' employment, cut back the power of the unions, and commercialize goods – among which are educational and cultural ones – about which, after historic struggles, agreement had been reached that they were public services. It would seem that the big groups in which power is concentrated are the ones that subordinate art and culture to the market, the ones that discipline work and daily life.

A broader view allows us to see other economic and political transformations, supported by long-lasting cultural changes, that are giving a different structure to the conflicts. The crossings between the cultured and the popular render obsolete the polar representation between both modalities of symbolic development, and therefore revitalize the political opposition between hegemonics and subalterns, conceived as if it were a question of totally distinct and always opposed groups. What we know today about the intercultural operations of the mass media and new technologies, and about the reappropriation that makes them diverse receivers, distances us from the theses about the omnipotent manipulation of the big metropolitan consortia. The classic paradigms with which domination was explained are incapable of taking into account the dissemination of the centers, the multipolarity of social initiatives, the plurality of references – taken from diverse territories – with which artists, artisans, and the mass media assemble their works.

The increase in processes of hybridization makes it evident that we understand very little about power if we only examine confrontations and vertical actions. Power would not function if it were exercised only by bourgeoisie over proletarians, whites over indigenous people, parents over children, the media over receivers. Since all these relations are interwoven with each other, each one achieves an effectiveness that it would never be able to by itself. But it is not simply a question of some forms of domination being superimposed on others and thereby being strengthened. What gives them their efficacy is the obliqueness that is established in the fabric. How can we discern where ethnic power ends and where family power begins, or the borders between political and economic power? Sometimes it is possible, but what is most important is the shrewdness with which the cables are mixed, and secret orders passed and responded to affirmatively.
Hegemonic, subaltern: heavy words that helped us to name the divisions between people but not to include movements of affection and participation in solidary or complicit activities in which hegemonic and subaltern groups are needed. Those who work on the border in constant relation with the tourism, factories, and language of the United States look strangely at those who consider them to be absorbed by the empire. For the protagonists of those relations, the interferences of English in their speech (to a certain extent equivalent to the infiltration of Spanish in the South of the United States) express the indispensable transactions in which everyday exchanges happen.

It is not necessary to look at those transactions as phenomena exclusive to zones of dense interculturalism. The ideological dramatization of social relations tends to exalt so much the oppositions that it ends by not seeing the rites that unite and connect them; it is a sociology of gratings, not of what is said through them or when they are not there. The most rebellious popular sectors and the most combative leaders satisfy their basic needs by participating in a system of consumption that they do not choose. They cannot invent the place where they work, the transportation that brings them there, nor the school where they educate their children, nor their food, nor their clothes, nor the media that supply them with daily information. Even protests against that order are made using a language they do not choose and demonstrating in streets or squares that were made by others. However many transgressive uses they make of the language, the streets, and the squares, the resignification is temporary and does not cancel the weight of the habits whereby we reproduce the sociocultural order, inside and outside of ourselves.

These realities — so obvious, but usually omitted in the ideological dramatization of conflicts — become clearer when nonpolitical behaviors are observed. Why do the popular sectors support those who oppress them? Medical anthropologists observe that in the face of health problems, the usual conduct of subaltern groups is not to attack the exploitation that makes it difficult for them to receive adequate care, but rather to accommodate themselves to the uses of the illness by private medicine or to take advantage as much as possible of deficient state services. This is not due to a lack of consciousness about their health needs, about the oppression that weighs them down, nor about the inadequacy or speculative cost of the services. Even when radical means of action are available for confronting inequality, they opt for intermediate solutions. The same thing happens in other scenarios. In the face of the economic crisis, they demand better salaries and at the same time limit their own consumption. Against political hegemony, the transaction consists, for example, in accepting personal relations in order to obtain individual benefits; in the ideological realm, in incorporating and positively valuing elements produced outside of their own group (criteria of prestige, hierarchies, designs, and functions of objects). The same combination of scientific and traditional practices — going to the doctor or to the healer — is a transactional way of taking advantage of the resources of both medicines, whereby the users reveal a conception that is more flexible than that of the modern medical system, so attached to allopathy, and of many anthropologists and folklorists who idealize the autonomy of traditional practices. From the perspective of the users, both therapeutic modalities are complementary and function as
repertoires of resources starting from which they effect transactions between hege-
monic and popular knowledge.9

The hybridizations described throughout this book bring us to the conclusion
that today all cultures are border cultures. All the arts develop in relation to other
arts: handicrafts migrate from the countryside to the city; movies, videos, and songs
that recount events of one people are interchanged with others. Thus cultures lose
the exclusive relation with their territory, but they gain in communication and
knowledge.

There is yet another way in which the obliquity of the symbolic circuits allows us
to rethink the links between culture and power. The search for mediations and
diagonal ways for managing conflicts gives cultural relations a prominent place in
political development. When we do not succeed in changing whoever governs, we
satirize him or her in Carnival dances, journalistic humor, and graffiti. Against the
impossibility of constructing a different order, we establish masked challenges in
myths, literature, and comic strips. The struggle between classes or ethnic groups is,
most of the time, a metaphorical struggle. Sometimes, starting from metaphors, new
transformative practices slowly or unexpectedly invade the picture.

At every border there are rigid wires and fallen wires. Exemplary actions, cultural
rodeos, rites are ways of going beyond the limits wherever possible. I think of the
cunning of undocumented migrants in the United States, of the parodic rebellious-
ness of Colombian and Argentine graffiti. I remember the Mothers of the Plaza de
Mayo walking every Thursday in a cyclical ritualism, holding photos of their dis-
appeared children like icons, until they succeeded years later in having some of the
guilty condemned to prison.

But the frustrations of human rights organizations make us reflect also on the role
of culture as a symbolic expression for sustaining a demand when political paths are
closed. The day the Argentine Congress approved the Law of Ending (Ley de Punto
Final), which absolved hundreds of torturers and murderers, two formerly dis-
appeared persons put themselves into narrow booths, handcuffed and blindfolded,
in front of the legislative palace, with posters that said “The end means returning to
this” – the ritual repetition of disappearance and confinement as the only way of
preserving memory of them when political failure seemed to eliminate them from
the social horizon.

This limited symbolic effectiveness leads to that fundamental distinction for defin-
ing relations between the cultural and political fields that we analyzed in the preced-
ing chapter: the difference between action and acting. A chronic difficulty in the
political valorization of cultural practices is to understand them as actions – that is,
as effective interventions in the material structures of society. Certain sociologizing
readings also measure the utility of a mural or a film by its capacity to perform and
generate immediate and verifiable modifications. It is hoped that the spectators
respond to the supposed “conscientizing” actions with “consciousness-raising” and
“real changes” in their conduct. As this almost never happens, one reaches pessimistic
conclusions about the efficacy of artistic messages.

Cultural practices are performances more than actions. They represent and simulate
social actions but only sometimes operate as an action. This happens not only in
cultural activities that are expressly organized and acknowledged as such; ordinary
behaviors too, whether grouped in institutions or not, employ simulated action and symbolic performance. Presidential discourses in the face of a conflict that cannot be resolved with the available resources, the criticism of governmental performance by political organizations without the power to reverse it, and, of course, the verbal rebellions of the common citizen are performances that are more understandable for the theatrical gaze than for that of “pure” politics. Anthropology informs us that this is not due to the distance that crises put between ideals and acts but to the constitutive structure of the articulation between the political and the cultural in any society. Perhaps the greatest interest for politics in taking into account the symbolic problematic lies not in the sure efficacy of certain goods or messages but in the fact that the theatrical and ritual aspects of the social make evident what there is of the oblique, the simulated, and the deferred in any interaction.

Notes

1 On Chile, see Lechner’s *Notas sobre la vida cotidiana* and Brunner’s *Un espejo trizado Ensaios sobre cultura y políticas*, especially the first part. With respect to Argentina, see Landi (1984).

2 The photos of this series of monuments were taken by Paolo Gori. The book that he did with Helen Escobedo is entitled *Mexican Monuments: Strange Encounters* (1980). A more extensive analysis of the problems treated here can be found in my article “Monuments, Billboards, and Graffiti,” included in that volume. I am grateful to the Institute of Aesthetic Research of the National University of Mexico for having facilitated my access to photos by Gori that were not included in the book, and that were donated by the author to that institution.

3 Two historians of Chicano art, Shifra M. Goldman and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, have documented this cultural production and reflected upon it in an original way (1985). See, for example, the introductions to their book *Arte Chicago: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Chicago Art, 1965–1981*: see also the articles by both of them in Rodriguez Prampolini.

4 It should be clarified that the conception of life as a constant crossing of borders, although it remains adequate, is not as easy as Michel de Certeau pronounces it when it is a question of “second-class” North American citizens – for example, blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos.

5 The report of this investigation can be read in García Canclini and Safa, *Tijuana: la ala de toda la genri*: photos by Lourdes Grobet. Jennifer Metcalfe, Federico Rosas, and Ernesto Bermejillo collaborated in the study.

6 With respect to the intercultural hybridization among rockers, *cholos*, and punks who produce magazines, records, and cassettes with information and music from various continents – see Valenzuela (1998).

7 The second slogan involves a play on words that does not translate into English without losing the effect of the original Spanish: “Dios no cumple. Ni años.” But the free translation given here captures more or less the sentiment of the original. – *Trans.*

8 This affirmation, like others I cite from Fontanarrosa, was obtained in a personal interview with him in Rosario, Argentina, on 18 March 1988.

9 I am using here the investigations carried out by Menéndez and Módena, who extensively analyze the practices of transaction.
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