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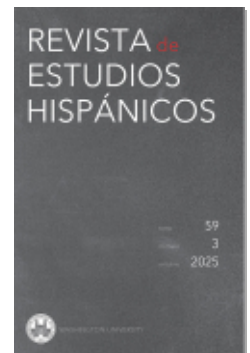
On a Road to Nowhere: Circularity and Repetition in José Agustín's *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)*

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Revista de Estudios Hispánicos, Tomo 59, Número 3, Octubre 2025, pp. 477-499 (Article)

Published by Washington University in St. Louis

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rvs.2025.a994458>



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On a Road to Nowhere: Circularity and Repetition in José Agustín's *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)*

This essay examines José Agustín's novel Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna) (1973) as a work that gives spatial form to the collapse of the Mexican state's postwar program of autonomous industrialization. Focusing on the formal use of circularity and repetition, it argues that Agustín's novel creates patterns that shape the experience of Mexican modernity according to newly found principles of consumer society. The port city of Acapulco is centered as an emblematic site to narrate the limits to the developmental program of the Mexican state. The novel's simultaneous approximation to Acapulco as a slice of paradise and a raging inferno, although rarely explored in relation to the peripheral logic of Mexico's capitalist modernization, captures the pressures exerted on the dependent world by the advent of late capitalism.

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The high-octane saga of Mexican literature known as *literatura de la Onda* has been usually ascribed the following characteristics: it marks a formal refusal from the modernist aesthetic that dominated the Mexican literary landscape of the previous decades; it favors the present over the past; it is bound by youth and youth identity; it celebrates and assimilates popular language (word play, teen slang, double entendre, vulgar speech); it opens Mexican literature to the influence of film, rock n' roll ("la nueva música clásica"), television, and the beatnik and hippie subcultures; it incorporates, unabashedly and for the first time, the extensive use of English; it registers the urban experience and everyday lives of the emerging middle classes; and it dwells in taboo and forbidden topics, most prominently sex, drugs, and homosexuality (Brushwood 1989; Chiu-Olivares 1990; D'Lugo 1997; Gunia 2004; Schaffer 1986). But as Elena Poniatowska suggests when writing about José Agustín and his generation, "agruparlos en un solo movimiento para uniformarlos como si ninguno tuviera características propias

resulta parecido a que las mujeres que escribimos nos llamaran ‘la literatura de la falda, o de la blusa, o de la bolsa de mano’ como si nuestras preocupaciones de amor, maternales o culinarias nos incorporaran automáticamente a una secta” (*¡Ay vida...!* 198). Reflecting on the heyday of *la Onda*, Agustín would similarly complain that the monicker—first used by Margo Glantz in her 1971 essay “Onda y escritura: jóvenes de 20 a 33”—ended up reducing the works of his cohort to the thematic combo of “jóvenes-coloquialismo-drogas-sexo-roncanrol,” erroneously bundling together “gente que circulaba por carreteras distintas” (“La onda” 13). In addition, Agustín pointed out that the label mistakenly blurred the lines between the group of writers that began publishing in the mid-1960s and the youth movement that, throughout the decade, came to be known as *La Onda*.

The interpretive disagreement is markedly tied to matters of periodization. Literary criticism has often conceived *la Onda* as a literary precursor to the student movement of 1968, with its uninhibited joyfulness, transgression of social norms, and thinly veiled critique of the values upheld by previous generations (the so-called *brecha generacional*) commonly read as foreshadowing the rebellion against the authority of the Mexican state that would reach its climax in the Tlatelolco massacre.¹ According to this reading, what *la Onda* accomplished “in the literary realm . . . so did the movement of 1968, in the political realm” (Brushwood 66). This helps explain why, when referring to *la Onda*, critics have tended to focus on those novels published in the mid-60s, namely Agustín’s *La tumba* (1964) and *De perfil* (1966), and Gustavo Sainz’s *Gazapo* (1965), followed closely by Parménides García Saldaña’s *Pasto verde* (1968) and Margarita Dalton’s *Larga sinfonía en D* (1968). It has also led to periodizing hypotheses that, by definition, do not extend past the early ’70s. Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska set the temporal limits of “la Onda” between 1966 and 1972 (Monsiváis 227; Poniatowska, *¡Ay vida...!* 176), and Agustín himself would go on to argue that “la literatura sobre la juventud escrita desde la juventud” was a phenomenon that, for the most part, developed between 1964 and 1973 (“La onda” 9). Needless to say, this periodization becomes impractical once the historical conjuncture of 1968 is surpassed. Read as a form of testimony, in the aftermath of 1968-71 *la Onda* loses its import and rapidly devolves into a dated product, a window into the social milieu of the late ’60s and early ’70s but hardly anything else.

This essay turns to José Agustín's 1973 novel *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)* to interrogate the stakes of reintroducing *la Onda* into a larger account of the spatial reconfiguration of the Mexican novel of the long sixties. Agustín's novel is approached not as a literary remnant of the countercultural effervescence of the late '60s, nor as part of the *literatura juvenil* that the label *literatura de la Onda* ultimately refers to, but as a novel that, in its spatial composition, gives form to the social space that emerged from the dilapidation of the Mexican state's postwar program of autonomous industrialization. The essay shows how, by registering a radical transformation in the characters' experience of place and formalizing the subjection of everyday life to the rhythms of the mechanization of labor, *Se está haciendo tarde* performs the unraveling of the developmental project that grew out of the Mexican Revolution. Throughout the essay, particular attention is paid to the use of sound and sound technologies to negotiate the consolidation of a new social order in post-Tlatelolco Mexico.

Dirt Roads and Dead Ends

José Agustín wrote *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)* between 1970 and 1972. By his own account, the novel was written on "las bolsas de las tortas" his father sent to the offices of the *Ministerio Público* where Agustín was detained in December 1970 following an incident involving marijuana possession (*El rock* 145). Agustín continued writing the novel after being transferred to the Lecumberri prison, where he spent several months in 1971 (*El rock* 171-72). *Se está haciendo tarde* narrates the one-day journey of Rafael—a twenty-nine-year-old initiated in the esoteric arts of tarot and coffee reading—from Mexico City to the port of Acapulco. Upon his arrival, Rafael meets with his dealer, Virgilio, who will guide him through the decadent landscape of Acapulco and finally to the Coyuca lagoon (the "laguna" of the title.) Along the journey Rafael will befriend Francine, Gladys, and Paulhan, three foreign dilettanti who roam the beaches of Acapulco in search of "el puro rol, el gran rolaqueo" (26). After a series of sensuous episodes, the novel comes to an abrupt end in the middle of a *delirium tremens* induced by the consumption of psilocybin.

Raymond L. Williams has noted that *Se está haciendo tarde* "is a novel with little plot, practically no psychological development of

its characters, and a paucity of description concerning the setting”; and that it recounts a series of “disconnected and discontinuous experiences [that] consist mostly of regular and self-indulgent consumption of drugs and American rock music from the late 1960s and early 1970s” (70). The novel has no chapter divisions; instead, it implements a series of visual strategies that punctuate the characters’ incessant banter. As Susan Schaffer indicates, “the novelist plays with the layout of the text on the page so that gaps, indentations flush right or flush left and isolated phrases disrupt the linear quality of reading. These pictorial techniques culminate in the use of several blacked-out passages designed to signal the characters’ complete loss of sense perception in the closing scene of the novel” (139). In Williams’ opinion, these “visual signposts . . . interrupt and guide the reader through the narrative just as a poster interrupts a linear ‘reading’ of a wall or a street” (72). The novel’s visual strategies also enhance its construction as a road novel, a journey in the dual sense of a road trip and a trip of the mind. Arguing along these lines, Glantz has suggested that “la onda se mantiene lógicamente en onda mediante el movimiento. Los onderos son ‘rodantes’ . . . El viaje psicodélico, el de la marihuana, el del sexo, el que entrecruza sexo y baile y droga y bebida, se vuelve el viaje hacia adentro: así el viaje concreto se vuelve de pronto viaje inducido” (“La onda” 122). Not surprisingly, the continued use of drugs (ranging from alcohol and marijuana to psilocybin) has been the usual starting point to analyze *Se está haciendo tarde*’s most salient formal features. But beyond Agustín’s attempt to relate the experience of intoxication, this essay argues that the novel’s visual strategies give formal expression to a spatiotemporal order founded on the consolidation of a new pattern of capital reproduction in Mexico.

At first sight, it would seem odd to choose a novel set in Acapulco to refer to a period in Mexican history profoundly marked by the events of 1968 and, therefore, by the predominance of Mexico City as an urban setting. These are, by all accounts, the years when the centralism of the Mexican literary field—heavily scrutinized from the ’90s onward—reached its peak, and when the Mexican cultural landscape came to be seamlessly administered from the nation’s capital.² These are also the years of the emergence of *sociedad civil*, a corollary to the country’s “urban political awakening” (Gerlofs 35).

La Onda in general and Agustín in particular have been commonly read as providing a literary portrait of the burgeoning middle classes of the Mexican metropolis, what Glantz, in reference to the prototypical middle-class neighborhood in Mexico City, refers to as the “*narvartensis* típico” (“Onda” 98). However, from the 1940s onward Acapulco underwent a series of radical transformations closely linked to the developmental aspirations of the Mexican state (Andrade 2025), to the point where the urban dynamic that surfaced in Acapulco came to register like no other the spatial contradictions of the so-called Mexican Miracle.

From its opening paragraphs *Se está haciendo tarde* offers a markedly historical account of this process:

Esta historia en verdad se inicia en Caleta, que con Caletilla vio momentos de gran prosperidad en la década de los años cincuenta. Grandes hoteles, turismo internacional, los cabarés de moda se ubicaron allí. Sin embargo, cuando empezó la década de los años sesenta las celebridades y el ruido se mudaron al sur de Acapulco . . . A principios de los setenta algunos turistas adinerados y su cortejo de aventureros y codiciosos volvieron a Caleta. Playa risueña de manso oleaje. (15)

In an uncommon gesture for *la Onda* novels, *Se está haciendo tarde* opens with a historical overview that explicitly frames the story of Rafael and Virgilio within the larger process of Acapulco’s urbanization.

By the early 1970s Caleta has become an emplacement of decadence: “Allí ya no va *nadie*” (15, emphasis in the original). The modern landscape that captured the imagination of the Mexican bourgeoisie has given way to an intricate system of dirt roads and dead ends that lead the developmental aspirations of the Mexican state astray. Upon his arrival to Acapulco, Rafael is forced to wander through a maze of “pequeñas calles todas con agujeros y pedruscos” (20). A local taxi driver struggles to find Virgilio’s home address, and at the end of the trip Rafael laments having to pay “por la pesadilla de estar dando vueltas y vueltas por el *mismo* lugar” (20, emphasis in the original). When Rafael finally reaches “Calle del Mar 199, Mozimba” he is appalled by the pauperized condition of Virgilio’s quarters: “¿Y la casa de Virgilio? La veredita había terminado y frente a ella sólo había dos paredes improvisadas con ladrillos y otras dos que atestiguaban la

Glancing through the window of the taxi that first transports him to Virgilio's quarters, Rafael is immediately taken aback by the beauty of the natural scenery:

El motor del taxi caracoleó y petardeó ruidosamente al subir, entre más piedras y baches, hasta una intersección de cinco calles: una gran campana roja en una casa; y más allá de la falda del monte, el mar, inmenso; y en el fondo, la playa de Pie de la Cuesta: una línea dorada extendiéndose hasta el horizonte, con las olas rompiendo fuertemente con una blanca inmovilidad; una fila de árboles y palmeras inclinadas y la laguna de Coyuca, casi gris a esas horas, con las montañas azules a lo lejos. Rafael se asombró: la imagen era bellísima, reconfortante: tenía que ir allí, Dios mío, ese lugar es el *paraíso*. (19, emphasis in the original)

By the end of the novel, after bouncing around the city and consuming several rounds of drinks, joints, and hallucinogens, the characters finally make their way to the Coyuca lagoon only to see it become the setting of their most feverish nightmares: “Qué oscuridad engullendo todo, tragándose la laguna de Coyuca, su vegetación y sus embarcaciones. Eso *era* el paraíso, ¿cómo se transformó en este infierno? Corazón agrietándose” (237, emphasis in the original). While the youthful debauchery of its characters and the distortions produced by a parade of hallucinatory visions have won *Se está haciendo tarde* a place in the Mexican countercultural archive, it is important not to lose sight of the change in the experience of place that undergirds the entire narrative. As representational spaces Acapulco and the Coyuca lagoon undergo a complete transformation from paradise into hell. The transformation is even more significant as it is presented as the corollary to the characters' day-long journey through Acapulco's modern districts. Moreover, Coyuca's transfiguration contrasts sharply with the characters' lack of psychological development. It becomes plausible, then, to read the novel not only as a slippage from daydream to nightmare (another long day's journey into night), or, as this essay has insinuated, as a back-and-forth between the illusion of development and the actuality of underdevelopment, but to understand the change effected in the experience of place as a direct result of the journey comprised by the modernization of Acapulco itself. In other words, Coyuca's metamorphosis is spatially formulated as the outcome of the developmental program of the Mexican state. Virgilio

and Rafael charge at full speed through the highway of modernization (for is this not, precisely, what the Costera Miguel Alemán is!) only to find, at the end of the road, the enchanted oasis they have been chasing transmuted into a raucous, macabre, exitless den. By the end of their journey the characters of *Se está haciendo tarde* find themselves trapped in this outlandish place both in a literal sense (once they step into the boat of a local *lancharero* they become surrounded by water) and in a symbolic sense: the novel does not provide any closure, its ending leaves Rafael lost in the middle of an unfulfilled promise.

Circularity

Se está haciendo tarde affirms Michel de Certeau's maxim according to which "Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice" (115). In Agustín's novel the characters exist in motion, their displacement transforms the configuration of the space they traverse. Even before the first page of the novel, the Coyuca lagoon is announced as the destination of the journey ("final en laguna"). However, as the story develops, the arbitrariness of the characters' movement tends to challenge the sequential order that arrives at the *end* of the story by way of a beginning and a middle. These contrasting spatial attributes seem to reenact the tension de Certeau assigns to the map and the itinerary as the two elementary kinds of travel stories (119). In the opening scene of the novel, Rafael glances at the Coyuca lagoon from a distance; his first image of the coastal landscape is a product of *seeing* rather than *going*.⁴ The resulting projection, which orders the topography of Acapulco according to a *here* and *there*, a point of departure and a destination, produces a univocal spatial arrangement upon which the characters' actions begin to unfold. Nevertheless, the univocity of the map and its fixed spatial order become almost immediately undone by the characters' gratuitous itinerary; their haphazard pilgrimage through Acapulco turns the scales in favor of the polyvalence of the path.

Recall Rafael's first trip to Virgilio's house: "El motor del taxi caracoleó y petardeó ruidosamente al subir, entre más piedras y baches, *hasta una intersección de cinco calles: una gran campana roja en una casa*; y más allá de la falda del monte, el mar, inmenso" (19, emphasis added). The five-way intersection and the memorable big red bell will reappear a few lines later as the taxi driver struggles to find Virgilio's

home address: “de nuevo se encontraron con la casa de la campana roja y Pie de la Cuesta en el fondo, *con su belleza serena y primigenia*” (19, emphasis added); and again almost immediately after that: “de nuevo una calle empinada y se hallaron en la intersección de calles la casa con la campana roja y con Pie de la Cuesta y la laguna de Coyuca en el fondo, como una visión pacificadora” (20). More than halfway through the novel, in the middle of a car chase, Rafael finds himself once again confronted by the house with the big red bell: “Por último llegaron a una intersección de cinco calles, una gran campana roja en una casa esquinada y bajo el monte, el mar hendiendo los despeñaderos hasta la playa de Pie de la Cuesta, una hilera de vegetación y tras ella la superficie enorme, visionaria, de la laguna de Coyuca. ¡Por aquí pasé yo en la mañana y por aquí me perdí, nos vamos a volver a perder!” (167). In a sleight of hand, the bell has metamorphosed from a reference point into a premonitory indication that lets the characters know they are about to lose their way. As the persecution continues, the party cannot avert driving in circles. The group keeps trying to escape from the labyrinth of unpaved roads only to find itself inevitably reemerging at the five-way intersection: “¡Va de nuez!, anunció Virgilio, viendo enfrente la casa de la campana roja y en el fondo, como visión paradisiaca, impasible, serena, la laguna de Coyuca y Pie de la Cuesta” (169). The scene, with minor variations, is repeated a couple of times before the characters are finally able to break free and continue their race toward Pie de la Cuesta-Coyuca.

The circularity expressed in the persecution scene can be transposed to make sense of the variegated visual cues that exist in the novel. The text is earmarked by different elements that operate as so many other red bells, signposts to which the reader returns as the narrative continues to veer from a direct trajectory. Thus, the “numerous innovative literary techniques [employed] to throw the reader off balance” can be said to be embedded in the circular pattern that gives the novel its form (Schaffer 138). Parentheses, vertical bars (pipe symbols), blackouts, indentations, italics, and the recurring verses from The Beatles’ “Everybody’s Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey” help create a circular atmosphere that precludes the linearity of the story from becoming effectively established. Although the characters’ journey takes place over a single day, the regular reappearance of these visual cues makes it

difficult to situate their actions at a particular moment in time. There is often a lack of clarity regarding the amount of time that has elapsed since the characters began speaking or the exact locale where their conversations are taking place; every scene might as well have occurred at a different moment. The overall effect is tantamount to the dissolution of temporality in favor of spatial simultaneity, a process that, even if dependent on the characters' rolling inebriation at the level of plot, remains in line with the overarching architecture of the novel: "Vio la inmensidad de la playa y se vio caminando sin rumbo, desorientado, a la mitad del camino, creyendo que iba hacia algún lugar y en realidad estaba perdido, ridículamente perdido. Y por eso el tiempo se suspendió" (210). Rafael's trip to Acapulco turns out to be a confirmation of (rather than a resolution to) the anxiety that prompts him to leave Mexico City in the first place. In the first pages of the novel the readers learn that "Rafael persistía en una etapa extraña, en la cual muchas cosas quedaban sin sentido. Despertar sin saber dónde-quién-qué" (17). Rafael ends his journey at the exact same point where he started it. The psychedelic experience has not awakened him to a newly found clarity as to where-who-what. It is precisely because Rafael's anxiety predates his arrival to Acapulco that it would be a mistake to understand his ravaging disorientation as resulting *only* from his experimentation with drugs. The root of his disorientation must, therefore, lie elsewhere.

Commenting on the history of social space, Henri Lefebvre suggests that "The departure point for [a] history of space is not to be found in geographical descriptions of natural space, but rather in the study of natural rhythms, and of the modification of those rhythms and their inscription in space by means of human actions, especially work-related actions. It begins, then, with the spatio-temporal rhythms of nature as transformed by a social practice" (117). While Acapulco's landscape is far from being untouched when Rafael descends upon its shores, the adjacency between the city and the ocean continues to expose the dwellers of the bay area to something resembling the unmodified rhythms that preceded the production of social space. "Uno diría de este hipnótico, fosforescente, sensual y cautivante Acapulco," writes Francisco Tario in his *Acapulco en el sueño*, "que es el vértice de todas las fuerzas caóticas de la naturaleza" (Tario and Álvarez Bravo 116). Similarly, in *Se está haciendo tarde*, the ebb and flow of the tides serves as a constant

reminder of a time immemorial when life moved according to the cyclical rhythms of the ocean: “Una increíble mezcla de sonidos: el mar rugiendo su movimiento incesante, todas las olas son la misma ola. / Una ola dentro de la misma ola” (120). Nature exists for the characters of *Se está haciendo tarde* as a *beyond* (“En el fondo, el mar resplandecía” 203). In this sense, their destination is not a place as much as an outside. The spatial composition of *Se está haciendo tarde* is the result of the perceived contrast between the regularity of the cyclical movements of the ocean and the artificial velocity of the characters’ journey.

A certain nostalgia undergirds *Se está haciendo tarde*’s movement toward nature. Rafael arrives in Acapulco searching for some form of transcendence, a spiritual communion with the natural world. His metaphysical inclinations are formulated in opposition to the uniformities of economic space and the artificial temporality of the machine. Rafael, too, seems to “fantasize freedom in formlessness” (Kornbluh 27).⁵ The conclusion to the story, however, suggests the inefficacies of his liberatory ambitions. In the middle of a drug-induced frenzy, lying on the beach at Pie de la Cuesta, Rafael witnesses a machine emerge from the depths of the Pacific Ocean:

Cuando las olas se alzaban dejaban ver una caverna oscura de la cual salían construcciones derruidas, bóvedas altísimas, grandes engranajes, partes internas de máquinas, ruedas, arcoíris solidificados . . . Todas las imágenes se sucedían con tanta velocidad e incoherencia que el tiempo se convirtió en algo sin sentido: no podía existir tal simultaneidad. (209)⁶

The image serves as a forceful reminder of the degree to which nature has become instrumentalized. The perpetual movement of the waves, and with it the rhythms of nature, reappears by the end of the journey as nothing but an automated system of machinery. The image reveals the movement of the waves to be closer to the mechanics of the cassette player or the motor vehicle than to any kind of primordial natural order. Rafael’s quest to find a way out of the alienating experience of modernity turns out to be betrayed by the mechanization of natural time and its logical corollary, the naturalization of the machine.

Circularity realigns the spatial composition of *Se está haciendo tarde* with the process of penetration of capitalist relations of production into everyday life.⁷ The subsumption of everyday life to the

rhythms of the mechanization of labor undergirds the formal treatment of circularity and acceleration in *Se está haciendo tarde*. Over time, the pressure exerted upon everyday life by the acceleration of the cyclical motions of capital ends up inscribing a new social order in social space. *Se está haciendo tarde* modulates this process through its formal commitment to repetition.

Repetition

In *Se está haciendo tarde* repetition is most readily available in the continued return of The Beatles' "Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey": "The deeper you go, the higher you fly / The higher you fly, the deeper you go" (0:40-47). The recurring verses, interspersed at random throughout the text, underscore the novel's engagement with repetition as the structuring principle of a new form of sociality. As form, repetition conjures the standardization of time inherent in the mechanization of the labor process. In *Se está haciendo tarde* this transformation becomes objectified through the use of sound and sound technologies.

Undoubtedly, one of the most enjoyable aspects of Agustín's novel is its relation to music in general and rock music in particular. *Se está haciendo tarde* belongs to an order of literary works that Brian L. Price has referred to as "literatura mexicana de rock" (82). The novel abounds in references to U.S. and British rock of the late 1960s, something that, for the most part, brings together many of the works of *la Onda*. Famously, Agustín "sitúa sus historias en ambientes altamente musicales en donde se exploran las tensiones generacionales" (Price 85). In Mexican cultural studies, the rise of rock music and the emergence of an urban youth subculture has been generally read as an expression of the generational break that followed the bankruptcy of institutionalized national discourses.⁸ That rock music would become a privileged vehicle to mobilize this countercultural sensibility is no surprise given music's affordances for the creation of affective communities (Kaltmeier and Raussert 5). Similarly, the social and political crisis that materialized in the student protests of 1968 found in music a powerful instrument to voice the growing discontent of the Mexican population—one can simply point to the popular songs and *corridos* that were reworked as chants

during the early days of the student protests (Poniatowska, *La noche* 67), the emergence of *canción de protesta* as a music genre, or the first attempts to create a *rock en español*. Regarding the campaign aimed at discrediting rock n' roll, Agustín writes:

La época, especialmente intolerante, tenía a la represión como respuesta inmediata, natural, del sistema ante cualquier manifestación de inconformidad o rebeldía. Los mexicanos debían estar orgullosos de vivir en un país con libertad, paz, justicia social, democracia, crédito internacional y crecimiento sostenido. Ni remotamente se les ocurría que pudieran estar equivocados. (*La contracultura* 35)

In this context, rock music became an opening (among many others) for new generations to challenge the social norms that shaped their experience of everyday life.

While convincing, this interpretation runs the risk of indulging in romantic fantasies about youth culture that remain oblivious to the social disparity and class-specific values ingrained in rock music's production and circulation, many of which have been erased from accounts of the Mexican 1970s. Glantz, for example, suggests that "Ahora se trata de los jóvenes, *nueva clase social, nueva raza humana* que se liquida en oleadas progresivas cada vez que una de sus generaciones alcanza la terrible edad de los treinta años" ("Onda" 94, emphasis added). Against this idea, Peter Wicke has argued that "rock music is so closely related to the social, class-specific experiences of its listeners that it only becomes comprehensible when considered as a medium for these experiences; detached from these it loses all meaning" (75). Wicke further points out the impossibility of a "social no-man's-land of a classless youth culture" (76). On the contrary, youth culture and its political subtexts vary according to the listener's position within a particular matrix of exploitation and domination.

Thus the circulation and consumption of rock music, much more emphatically in a milieu structured by economic dependency, will remain tied to the differential access to sound technologies that overdetermine the acoustic practices of diverse subcultures.⁹ For example, the introduction of the tape recorder and the cassette system brought about substantial changes in people's relation to

music both at the individual and collective levels, precipitating a crisis of representation and referentiality: “You no longer offer a musical object for contemplation and gustation; you wire up the context and make space musical around the consumer” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 299-300). The consolidation of a new soundscape in the late ’60s and early ’70s supports the understanding of why a novel like Agustín’s *De perfil*, where rock music is predominantly consumed through “contemplation and gustation,” although set in one of the quintessentially petty-bourgeois neighborhoods of the nation’s capital, remains akin to the representational practices that spread out from the *hoyos fonquis* and *cafés cantantes* of Mexico City. Meanwhile, a novel like *Se está haciendo tarde*, where rock music is entirely consumed by way of the cassette and record player, produces a sound politics that stands much closer to the wired-up spaces of the Mexican bourgeoisie, even if the novel has in Virgilio one of the most accomplished literary portraits of that segment of the Mexican relative surplus population that “stands with one foot already in the swamp of pauperism” (Marx 796). The point, however, is not to contrast the commercialization of rock music with the class-specific practices that mediate its circulation and consumption, but to offer a reflection on the role the latter play in the standardization of time and the production of space in the Mexican novel of the 1970s.

In *Se está haciendo tarde* the cassette and the record player operate as time-measuring instruments, their use alerting the reader to the “changing cultural sensibilities of Mexican middle-class youth” (Zolov 113). Throughout the novel the characters experience the passing of time only by virtue of the tracks they listen to. Song names and lyrics filter through their dialogue to become one of the few, if not the only, temporal markers available to them: “¿a qué horas se acabó Led Zeppelin II? ¿En In a Gadda da Vida? ¿Me habré tardado mucho en el baño?” (59); “¡No no!, protestó Virgilio, ¡están a toda madre los Beatlecinés! Además, ya se va a acabar!” (183). As a time-measuring instrument, the record player propagates the logic of repetition. The record/cassette player plugs the listener into a loop in which time is only subject to being measured by reference to the loop itself: “La música, To Our Children’s Children’s Children: Moody Blues, del departamento contiguo, volvió a repetirse desde el principio con mayor volumen” (90).¹⁰

As it subjects the temporality of the novel to the mechanics of the tape recorder, repetition formalizes a new temporal order based on the standardization of time. Throughout the novel sound technologies cut time (rewind, forward, stop, play) in the same way that vertical bars [|] interrupt the characters' dialogue (a formal element that is already present in Agustín's earlier works). Through this formal mechanism, *Se está haciendo tarde* unexpectedly reveals repetition as a form of interruption. The overall effect is not devoid of irony: Rafael's quest for a free-form encounter with nature is dissolved in the rip current of repetition. Through its use of sound technologies *Se está haciendo tarde* stages a certain kind of violence, one that evokes Jacques Attali's commentary regarding the changing modes of the accommodation of music to power: "we have detected . . . repetition in a society that talks so much about change, silence in the midst of so much noise, death in the heart of life" (120). The consumption of rock music has come to be understood as repetitive consumption. Rather than a road to transcendence, the comfort derived from listening to rock reveals itself as a form of conformity with the temporal logic of commodity production. Music becomes the perpetual background noise to the characters' empty dialogue, each one a negative copy of the other. Going one step further, repetition formalizes the logic of mass production. In Playa Condesa, young people were "oyendo el rock ininterrumpido que salía de los altavoces" (119); the car stereo plays "Rock electrónico: un continuum de sonido con muchas emociones sumergidas" (169). These examples from Agustín's novel seem to validate Attali's observation that mass music "has replaced natural background noise, invaded and even annulled the noise of machinery . . . musical repetition confirms the presence of repetitive consumption, of the flow of noises as ersatz sociality" (111). Progressively, repetition prevents music from bearing any identifiable meaning: "Las voces de todos parecían salir de la música, a tal grado se hallaban integradas en la belleza, franjas de sol, pero, ¿qué están diciendo?" (82, emphasis added). Words and music become purposeless, linearity is interrupted, and the characters are compelled to continue moving around without being able to arrive anywhere. Counterintuitively, repetition propels expansion.

The novel's structure, or apparent lack thereof, the absence of chapter divisions or a coherent distribution of segments, blurs the

specificity of any single one of its episodes. The fast-paced dialogue made up of short, often cut-off phrases haphazardly gives way to lengthy, heavy, intractable paragraphs. As repetition spills over the landscape of Acapulco, space becomes saturated, made uniform by the standardized logic of reproduction. Reflecting on the impact of repetition on the production of space, Lefebvre suggests:

It is obvious, sad to say, that repetition has everywhere defeated uniqueness, that the artificial and contrived have driven all spontaneity and naturalness from the field, and, in short, that products have vanquished works. Repetitious spaces are the outcome of repetitive gestures (those of the workers) associated with instruments which are both duplicatable and designed to duplicate: machines, bulldozers, concrete-mixers, cranes, pneumatic drills, and so on. Are these spaces interchangeable because they are homologous? Or are they homogeneous so that they can be exchanged, bought and sold, with the only differences between them being those assessable in money—i.e. quantifiable—terms (as volumes, distances, etc.)? At all events, repetition reigns supreme. (75)

From this standpoint, the transformation of Acapulco into a repetitive space mirrors the spatial order introduced by the collective housing projects and large apartment complexes (*multifamiliares*) built in Mexico City from the late 1940s onward as a solution to the housing crisis of the nation's capital. In both literature and architecture, the novel and the apartment complex, literary and built form, density becomes a spatial moniker for accumulation. In his investigation into the political economy of music, Attali develops this idea under the notion of the *stockpiling of time*: “Repetition constitutes an extraordinary mutation of the relation to human production. It is a fundamental change in the relation between man and history, because it makes the stockpiling of time possible” (101). Density brings the spatial composition of *Se está haciendo tarde* into a formal impasse; because density is suppressive, it negates motion and produces disorientation: “Spaces of high density convey an impression of solidity and stability. Within them, one feels almost embedded in a mesh; in extreme cases, one feels immobilized” (Janson and Tigges 84). Immobility and disorientation are, in many instances, what the characters of *Se está haciendo tarde* end up experiencing even as they race at full speed down the highway toward Pie de la Cuesta. Repetition betrays the

characters' displacement as pure fantasy. The characters in Agustín's novel are, from the start, moving along a road to nowhere.

Hallucinations

This formal impasse should prompt a revision of the political implications of *Se está haciendo tarde*'s experimental ingenuity. Commenting on the post-Boom novel, for example, Jean Franco once aptly considered: "Is it possible that the devices of shock, simultaneity, the juxtaposition of disparate elements, all of which activate perception, may not always or necessarily be 'revolutionary' but may indeed be methods for breaking down deep-rooted attitudes which stand in the way of full acceptance of consumer society? Is there a difference between a revolutionary poetics and a poetics of modernization?" (286). This tension captures with full force the ambiguities available in a novel like *Se está haciendo tarde*, which are, in general, the same ambiguities of the youth rebellion of the late '60s.

Revolution and modernization collide at full speed in *Se está haciendo tarde*: hallucination is the product of the wreckage. The blazing Dodge Charger that the main characters drive while a police car (a Volkswagen) chases them down the coastal highway is an incontrovertible figure of the developmental appetencies of the Mexican state. For once, the automobile is an unequivocal avatar of modernization, the paradigmatic example of mass production and the standardization of labor processes at the base of Fordism. In the cores of the capitalist world economy, most notably the United States, the consecration of this regime of accumulation led to a way of life organized around mass consumption that would, for the most part, remain aspirational for the entirety of the Third World. As Jameson notes, "the Third World is also (traditionally) a modernizing place, and the imported form which is the novel is fully as much a component of modernization as the importation of automobiles" ("Antinomies" 476). In the context of the Mexican 1970s, however, these two components of modernization will begin to break down, the novel in the form of the already alluded to crisis of representation, the "importation of automobiles" in the form of a growing contradiction between the higher and lower spheres of consumption (Marini 66-77). *Se está haciendo tarde*'s thin-veiled iconography cannot in any way be abstracted from this particular context.

Reflecting on the capitalist modernization of Latin America, Franco observes: "In the integration of new sectors of the population into capitalist economy, the dominant ideology took the form not only of the overt promotion of development but also of the subliminal messages which inculcated the desirability of modernization through media representation and lifestyles. Speed, mobility, and change were signifiers of the modern" (294). And, as it has already been established, speed, mobility, and change are everything *Se está haciendo tarde* wants to be. Thus, it is not only provocative but productive to read *Se está haciendo tarde* as a text that explores the problems posed by the "desirability of modernization" in Mexico, a situation that by 1973 is no longer conceivable to circumvent by way of a return to origins—as, for example, in Carlos Fuentes' *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962). Mexico's capitalist modernization, much like Rafael's interior journey, is a one-way trip: "Pero ya entrados en drogas hay quir palante palante. Hasta el pasón siempre" (219). As the characters of *Se está haciendo tarde* keep moving, their journey continues to lose its meaning, and they become less and less capable of altering its direction. Once inside the Dodge Charger, the characters can no longer steer their course, they are compelled to keep driving even as the world around them begins to fall apart.

It is symptomatic that at the same time *Se está haciendo tarde* was being published, Ruy Mauro Marini, in the closing argument to his *Dialéctica de la dependencia*, the most accomplished account of Latin American dependency, would venture that "se asiste en toda América Latina a la resurrección del modelo de la vieja economía exportadora" (75). Resurrection and hallucination can be read as parallel figures emerging from the collapse of Mexico's autonomous industrialization program; both of them serve to, as it were, call into question the solidity of lived experience. This perspective opens up a path to suggest a symbolic continuity between Juan Rulfo's Comala—land of resurrection—and Agustín's Acapulco—land of hallucination—despite the enmity that existed between both writers and their profound stylistic disparities. It is well known that Rulfo once referred to the *literatura de la Onda* as "literatura payasa" (Poniatowska, *¡Ay vida...!* 205); it is less so that Agustín promptly returned the favor: "Les voy a comprar tequila. Rafael buscó la botella más barata. La encontró. Tequila Ruco Rulfo, Sayula, Jalisco. Caramba, éste parece siniestro, les va a hacer polvo el estómago. Siete pesos. En México este tequila debe

de costar tres o cuatro pesos menos" (49-50). Beyond the generational feud, there remains an entrancing resemblance in the overall effect produced by Rulfo's and Agustín's accounts of the Mexican purgatory. While Rulfo's land of the dead unearths the dispossessed voices of the Mexican peasantry to call into question the dynamics of rural modernization (Beckman 814), Agustín's hallucinations dissolve the solidity of national discourses to reveal the limits to Mexico's peripheral industrialization. In *Se está haciendo tarde*, hallucination cannot but disclose the actuality of the development of underdevelopment.

The overpowering force of the Dodge Charger, carrying with it the historical weight of the developmental aspirations of the Mexican state, begins to dissolve as the characters move away from Acapulco and surrender to the experience of intoxication: "A duras penas podía recordar que ese auto había significado mucho, ¿pero qué?" (208). The end product is a formal synthesis between reality and hallucination. The characters' ravaging disorientation will ultimately lead them to question the authenticity of their own experience: "[P]or qué continúa la alucinación, ¿eh?, ¿yo soy el que ve eso o alguien ve a través de mí?, quién soy, ¿eh?" (58). Reformulating Franco's question on the difference between a revolutionary poetics and a poetics of modernization, it should be possible to ask if there is a real difference between the actuality of modernization and the fictitiousness of hallucination, whether Rafael's journey might be better understood as a departure from or a deep dive into reality: "¿Me regresaron a la realidad? ¿Ésta es la realidad? ¿Cuál es la realidad?" (112).

Rafael's psychotropic experiment casts doubt on the road map projected by Acapulco's urbanization. Both journeys end up producing full-blown hallucinations. In Barra de Coyuca, Francine heckles Virgilio: "Ahorita estás tan *passed out* que no te das cuenta de que estamos en mi departamento de la Costera, atizando. Nada de esto existe" (220, emphasis in the original). But what does "esto" ultimately refer to? As the characters give in to the experience of intoxication, the emancipatory prospect of modernity begins to lose its integrity, to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from hallucination itself, making it impossible to determine which of the two is more authentic, which the pipe dream and which the kernel of truth. The question is not a rhetorical one, and is also not exempt from contradiction, given that, as noted earlier, this is a situation that is no longer possible to circumvent. For the characters

of *Se está haciendo tarde* the only solution is to continue to pile one hallucination on top of the other: “Pinche cielo, es el mismo pendejo cielo de siempre, sólo con más luz y alucinaciones. Estúpidas alucinaciones” (212). The liberatory impulse that led Rafael to experiment with drugs is the same impulse that traps him in a hallucinatory maze, a rabbit hole where reality and irreality can no longer be separated from each other. Toward the end of the novel the characters of *Se está haciendo tarde* are left adrift, staring at the same eternal wave, waiting for development to arrive. The hallucinatory solution to the query of developmentalism aptly describes the problem at hand: as the title of the novel suggests, by the time Rafael arrives in Coyuca it is already too late, the liberatory opening has passed, and the only possibility left is to betroth oneself to an illusion. The holding pattern prompted by hallucination blurs developmentalism’s historical limits, it prevents the characters of *Se está haciendo tarde* from discerning reality from dream. Hallucination conceals that development has arrived, fully-fledged, bearing with it all the distortions of peripheral sociality and economic dependency.

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

NOTES

¹ On the repressive character of the Mexican state and its counterrevolutionary tendencies see Ochoa and Pensado. For cultural responses to 1968 see Long; Draper.

² Brian Price notes that “en términos de la escritura contracultural predomina una lógica centralista que privilegia la producción capitalina sobre la de las áreas limítrofes” (87).

³ For different approximations to Agustín’s novel see Lara-Alengrin; Othón Hernández; Schaffer; Williams.

⁴ According to de Certeau, spatial description “oscillates between the terms of an alternative: either *seeing* (the knowledge of an order of places) or *going* (spatializing actions)” (119).

⁵ Kornbluh full quote reads: “Mirages of Edenic identities, flowing energies, and deluging multitudes fantasize freedom in formlessness. Yet formed, mediated relations are the truth of our social being” (27).

⁶ The scene evokes Agustín’s own experience in Acapulco on December 13, 1970, as described in *El rock de la cárcel* (133-37).

⁷ “Mechanization, standardization, over-specialization and parcellization of labour, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life” (Mandel 387).

⁸ As Eric Zolov points out, “the mimicking of foreign rock styles . . . became an act of defiance against a cultural and political structure that limited and denied access to rock as (world) popular culture” (95). See also Monsiváis 226-262.

⁹ Jacques Attali has argued that “use-value in the music industry does not depend on the product alone, but also on the use-value of the receiver available to consumers” (103).

¹⁰ As John Mowitt indicates, “in the contemporary musical world (and this is not restricted to the West) repetition now constitutes the very threshold of music’s social audibility” (214-215).

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Keywords: circularity, repetition, José Agustín, la Onda, form, novel, Mexico, *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)*

Palabras clave: circularidad, repetición, José Agustín, la Onda, forma, novela, México, *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)*

Date of receipt: December 4, 2024

Date of acceptance: June 3, 2025