

**Body Text Accounting for Disability in Mexico:
Teletón and the Infantilization of Capital**

Susan Antebi

Those who tune in to Televisa during the first weeks of December or who circulate in the subways or on city streets in Mexico are unlikely to avoid encountering images promoting the Teletón campaign. Through the display of images of disabled children and visual narratives of their bodies and lives, Teletón, a project of Televisa, raises money for the creation of rehabilitation centers for children throughout the country. A casual encounter with Teletón, inevitable for many Mexicans, is first of all an encounter with such images and stories of childhood disability, of bodies marked as in need of intervention. It is also the opportunity for a financial transaction that is both instantaneous and ongoing; viewers begin to pay for the image as soon as they view it, whether they resist or cede to the request for a donation. For a form of payment takes place when one views advertisements by Teletón's corporate sponsors, or simply by the viewer's participation in a visual transaction. The disabled child offers visual pleasure and the audience pays attention; or the child aspires to rehabilitation while the audience aspires to moral elevation, thus creating an exchange between physical difference and the moral imperative to correct it. One might ask whether consideration of Teletón's role in Mexico must therefore hinge on the question of finance. Some donate while others refuse, and many question the moral and legal status of Teletón's profitable relationship to Televisa. Or perhaps the central issue could be defined through attention to the act of looking, and to the availability of specific children as visual objects. It might be simple enough to conclude that the two options are inseparable in this context and in general in the structure of spectacle, always rooted in some form of literal or imaginary payment. In other words, sooner or later one pays to look, spending to see a little bit more. Or one must look for a way to pay, to balance the transaction of what has already been seen and thus keep looking.

Freakish Encounters

Hispanic Issues On Line 20 (2018)

The mode of spectacle generated by Teletón in Mexico, as well as in many other Latin American countries, and by charity telethons familiar to US television viewers, resembles the structure of the freak show, specifically in the interdependence between visual and financial transactions. In both cases, the representation of physical disability is central to the show. Charity campaigns tend to represent disability as physical defects in need of cure or rehabilitation.¹ While freak shows did not traditionally emphasize rehabilitation, they did work to convince audiences of the defective or anomalous qualities of the bodies they displayed. Hence in both cases, the show underscores radical differences between bodies selected for the spectacle—as freaks—and the ostensibly conventional bodies of audience members. In addition, both kinds of show depend upon the audience's pleasure derived from viewing bodily differences.

As freak show historians have shown in their analysis and documentation of the display of unusual bodies, a lucrative practice that was most widespread in the US from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1930s (Bogdan 31, 67) both the ticket sales and the shows themselves were typically based on fraud (Ostman 132–3; Bogdan 11). This meant that the public was routinely and literally short-changed at the ticket counter and that “freaks” were constructed through fictitious narratives about their lives and places of origin. The interdependence of these modes of fraudulence would become most explicit in the sale of books and photographs purporting to document the true life stories of the performers and serving as both souvenir and proof of the veracity of the exhibit (Stulman Dennett 77–78; Bogdan 11–16). Paying and looking in the context of the freak show thus work as closely related forms of investment in the spectacle, in its truth value, and in a profitable and pleasurable relationship between spectators, performers and showmen.

The freak show as cultural institution and familiar fairground attraction throughout the US had largely disappeared by the 1940s, replaced by other forms of mass entertainment.² Yet the staged transaction through which disabled or otherwise unusual bodies are framed for a viewing public has continued and resurfaced in different modalities, one of the most common and financially successful of which is the charity telethon, the first of which aired in 1949 (Longmore 502). Although many other modes of such disability enfreakment exist in contemporary television, film and related entertainment, the telethon in particular clarifies a direct and compelling relationship between the structures of image and payment, as in the earlier freak show. If the freak show spectator aimed to purchase the truth value of bodies and stories on display, even at the risk of being (inevitably) duped, the telethon viewer buys the right to look at disabled bodies and the pleasure of contributing to the restoration of their humanity, and is similarly deceived into thinking that the stories of the displayed children are completely true. An additional deception

in telethon viewing occurs when the pleasure of moral action (helping children) becomes indistinguishable from the pleasure of looking—or staring—at children destined for rehabilitation.³ In one sense voyeurism may be said to masquerade as benevolence, while in another, as I will examine further, the telethon enterprise deceives its willing audience by extracting payment for bodies, lives and healthcare that are framed as priceless.⁴

In this essay I focus specifically on the Mexican Teletón and on the framing of disabled children as a spectacle embedded in financial transaction. Yet as I will argue here, Teletón is at times also marked by attempts to separate children from finance, and by extension, the visual operation through which disability is consumed from the costs and profits of the Teletón project. Rehabilitation is astronomically costly. Even though actual figures are not provided, televisual emphasis on state-of-the-art equipment and modern, gleaming facilities reminds viewers that expenses for access to such services are high, especially for members of the marginalized social sectors from which many of the Teletón children originate. Children themselves, in contrast, are widely understood to be priceless, and provoke emotional responses in the viewer that render all kinds of advertising especially effective.

As a show, Teletón must continue to provide visual evidence that encompasses both the logic of cost and gain and the limitless horizon of future rehabilitation, future childhood. The equation is awkward, while the separation between the visibility of disabled children and the circulation of funds is ultimately troubled and uncertain. This is perhaps in some sense why so many are willing to pay. Yet part of the complication of Teletón's visual and financial logic also stems from the incorporation of discourses that link the charity initiative to the public sector. In focusing exclusively on children, Teletón structures its message towards the future of Mexico. As one presenter notes during the opening ceremony of the 2011 Teletón drive, the initiative is for the “rehabilitation of a country.”⁵ And as then-president Felipe Calderón described in a brief speech on the program prior to his own personal donation to Teletón, the organization has actually cured “all of us,” that is to say, all Mexicans, of “the blindness” that didn't allow us to see disability (Milenio). Through such messages, Teletón becomes a campaign of imperative national transformation. The presidential message impels citizens to look and to see, to cast off blindness and to be cured, thus seeing and curing others. Vision becomes equivalent to payment for the rehabilitation of a collective whole. Curiously, this scene shifts between public and private, as the President moves between his role as head of state and individual donor, between his personal donation and his federal initiative to build two new pediatric hospitals, thanks to the inspiration of Teletón. At the same time, in performing this back and forth shift the President also enacts a movement between a collective, metaphorical and national body and the more literal bodies of disabled children

that are central to the event. The uncertain dynamic between public and private sectors is simultaneously marked by a tension between obligation and choice. All Mexicans must cast off disability collectively yet individual donation is always up to the viewer.

Such enactments of the Mexican Teletón's ambivalent position with respect to public and private sectors point to the origins of Teletón as a trans-American phenomenon. The original Teletón was founded in Chile in 1978 during the Pinochet regime, and was modeled on Jerry Lewis' Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, which had been on the air in the US since the 1950s.⁶ The Chilean Teletón was so successful that it spread to twelve different Latin American countries via an umbrella organization.⁷ The slogan of the first Chilean Teletón was "Let's achieve a miracle," a phrase that echoes Milton Friedman's reference to the Chilean "economic miracle" of the same period.⁸ In the decades following the 1973 coup, Chile's economic policies were defined by privatization of state-run industries, reduction in public spending, and increased opportunities for foreign investment. The changes exacerbated the divide between the richest and poorest sectors, while proponents of the neoliberal policies saw Chile as a model to be replicated throughout the region.⁹ In this broader context the Teletón "miracle" might be said to refer not just to the rehabilitation of children, nor only to economic renewal, but rather to the possibility of a uniquely combinatory role for public and private sectors, between obligation and freedom, private profit and collective generosity, displayed and regenerated through the bodies of children.

In contemporary Mexico, where as in Chile and other Latin American countries Teletón is alive and well, neoliberalism is conventionally interpreted as a weakening of the role of the state or public sector in the face of the growing impact of the market and of transnational capital.¹⁰ Televisa's success in capturing massive portions of entertainment and related markets both locally and internationally would seem to exemplify this phenomenon. At the same time, frequent allegations that the corporation uses its influence to control national politics point to an uneasy cross-over between public and private sectors.¹¹ The phenomenon of Teletón in particular highlights this uncertainty, making visible the roles of local and federal level public officials in the charity enterprise, as in the above-mentioned case of President Calderón's television appearance and donation.¹² In addition, widespread concern that Televisa may engage in tax fraud through the process of write-offs of Teletón donations has exacerbated critique of the corporation, leading to an increased sense that in the business of children's rehabilitation, and in entertainment more generally, political interest and private profit go—not so secretly—hand in hand.¹³

The images and visual narratives of children in repeating trajectories of disability and rehabilitation that define the Teletón project thus appear at the site of a transaction that is at once financial, political, and visual. In their

roles as simultaneously priceless children and consumable image-objects, the children on display occupy an impossible, and therefore highly compelling, position. Children command the viewers' attention as unique individual subjects, while at once evoking a more generic notion of the future, often within a discourse of a specifically Mexican national future. Of course, the idea of children as emblematic of the future is a familiar generalization, one that underscores the efficacy of the child-image beyond the specificity of the project at hand. Here I turn to the work of Reed Cooley, who analyzes the roles of Sara Palin and her son Trig, who has Down Syndrome, in creating a particular presence for disability in the U.S. political arena during the 2008 elections. One of the problems Cooley notes in Palin's rhetoric and in her use of Trig as central to her pro-family, pro-"special needs" platform is the resulting infantilization of disability, through an impression that disability is an issue only relevant in childhood (Cooley 314). A contradiction arises when the disabled child functions as emblematic of a political platform that gestures necessarily to the future, even as this future has already erased the image of the disabled adult (305-6).

Cooley considers this dilemma of the projected future through Lee Edelman's reading of the child or baby image as fascist projection of the future. In Walter Benjamin's "Conversations with Brecht," as Edelman describes, Brecht tells Benjamin that "life, despite Hitler, goes on, there will always be children," and continues in a passionate evocation of the dangers of fascism. Benjamin's subsequent reflection suggests a troubled response to this referencing of childhood. He writes: "While he spoke I felt a force acting on me that was equal to that of fascism; I mean a power that has its source no less deep in history than fascism." Edelman describes this power as "the fascism of the baby's face, which subjects us to its sovereign authority as the figure of politics itself . . . whatever face a particular politics gives that baby to wear" (Edelman 151; qtd. in Cooley 315).

Extending this reading, one might note that the extreme visibility of the child's face that demands that we look effectively blurs over the politics it "wears." In other words, the face of the child makes a specific political project into its own image.¹⁴ Cooley, like other disability studies scholars who borrow from this analysis, considers disability as a key intervening factor.¹⁵ Bringing together the face of the child and the face of disability, conflating socially aberrant corporeality and the flesh of the future creates a problematic horizon of future progress, yet one that is ripe for visual exploitation. In this case, as in telethons, the disabled child's face goes to work on a particular political or financial campaign. It demands to be looked at and in this sense, as pure image, it cannot help but solve the problem it poses. But it also asks to be erased from a future that will not include it as such. Edelman's "baby's face" thus saturates its political project of disability revela-

tion and erasure with an all-conquering image whose ambivalence always demands a second look.

One of the frequently asked questions on the Teletón website is, “Why don’t you attend to disabled people over the age of eighteen?” The answer, “because our doctors are pediatricians,” cleverly avoids the issue (“Preguntas frecuentes”). In fact, the rehabilitation of children allows for their visibility as models of progress towards a future that is always still to come, predictable, unwavering, and relentless; not now but later, not here but coming soon. Disabled adults on the other hand, many of whom are unemployed and lack access to basic resources and infrastructure for education and mobility, are here to stay yet tend to remain conveniently out of sight.

Teletón’s images of disabled children become the face not only of a projected future Mexico but in addition and more specifically of the cross-over between public and private interests, of the possibility of a particular mode of fusion of these sectors. As with other charity campaigns the immediate goal of Teletón is fund-raising. Images of children become inseparable from this activity and its finality, and yet as disability studies scholars have argued, this is not all that charity telethons accomplish. In the US context where telethons originated in the late 1940s and 50s, and from which Latin American telethons are said to be derived, the telethon has now all but disappeared, thanks in part to the work of disability activists who critiqued and questioned the telethon’s promotion of discriminatory ideology (Haller 148-52; Russell 86-95). Yet disability studies scholars have continued to make reference to telethon history as well as to related modes of entertainment through which social meanings of disability are constructed.¹⁶

Such interpretations are instructive of the specificity of the disability spectacle in distinct national settings while also providing a broader context for analysis of disability as public (and private) display. For Paul Longmore, for example, the telethon format formalizes and makes legitimate the activity of staring at disabled people, scrutinizing their bodies and the narrated film snippets that become the televisual stories of their lives (503). This also allows the viewer to delve into a vicarious, pleasurable passage from suffering to triumph, from painful past towards hopeful future. Through this production of visual pleasure, the charity campaign bears some resemblance to its progenitor, the freak show, particularly, as discussed above, when the telethon viewer contributes to the charity, hence paying for the pleasure of viewing.¹⁶ In addition, as Longmore describes, these telethons maintain the notion that disability is radically detrimental in every case, and must be corrected in order to allow the inclusion and participation of its so-called victims in society, while in practice the telethons promote a highly exclusionary opposition between disabled participants and able-bodied viewers (505–6).

In the US context analyzed by Longmore and other disability studies scholars, the charity Telethon shores up the concept of normality and situates disabled people as objects of charity. In addition, Longmore points briefly to the Telethon's role in transmitting "implicit political messages about the American system of provision for public health and welfare," and "explicit messages about corporate benevolence aimed at countering the negative image of big business" (505). Such observations suggest some degree of similarity with the context of the Mexican Teletón, as described above. In both cases the public display of disability and rehabilitation, framed by requests for private financial contributions, cannot fail to raise questions about public or private funding for medical treatment and research. Such displays also highlight the question of whether medical intervention is a right, necessity, privilege or choice. Yet in the case of Televisa's Mexican Teletón, these questions acquire a unique urgency, due in part to Televisa's far-reaching powers in both Mexican politics and the global marketplace, and consequently to the ambiguity of public versus private funding of Teletón (Cabrera; Mejía Madrid).

Situating disability—conceived as physical or mental defects in need of correction—perpetually in childhood justifies ongoing projects of national and social transformation, and the expenditures required to bring such programs to fruition, whether from public or private sectors. This is because the disabled child-image, emblem of the future as discussed above through Edelman's and Cooley's analyses, compels the viewer to respond, to look again and thus to pay, whether literally or via a visual transaction that marks a path from problem to projected solution.

This repeating discursive strategy, which has proven effective both for Teletón and for a range of early twentieth-century state-sponsored public health initiatives geared towards national improvement, links the contemporary Mexican charity campaign to a complex history of publicly funded representations of children as productive of notions of national character and of disability.¹⁷

Yet unlike in the case of public health campaigns, in the Teletón spectacle the image of the child as disabled, and disability as a phenomenon of childhood, becomes the occasion for a lively and jubilant refashioning of the individual child. The celebratory and individualized aspect of Teletón is exemplified through the participation of media celebrities, especially singers and actors who perform on the show and interact with the disabled children selected for this privilege, adding to the excitement of the audience. As an example of the effective fusion of the display of disabled children with artistic celebrity performance, one might consider the staging of the 2011 Teletón theme song, "Me siento vivo," ("I feel alive") composed by the Mexican group Fobia and sung on stage. This is followed by other musical numbers, by a combination of celebrities and disabled children, some standing or dancing, and some in

wheelchairs (Pentagrama Studio). The performance of the songs combines rehearsed and seemingly improvised segments, as well as attention to both the “star power” of featured singers and the participation of the children. Rather than a simple humanization of the disabled children featured in the song, the performance seems at once to offer their temporary elevation to celebrity status. This is achieved in part by association with celebrities, but also more broadly through evocation of each child’s heroic qualities in struggling to overcome the suffering and disadvantage purportedly brought on by physical impairment.

The lyrics of this particular song, repetitions of the title “I feel alive,” also serve to enhance and punctuate the celebratory tone of the group performance. These words effectively energize the performers as they begin to move to the beat of the song and may remind viewers that such lively feeling, and perhaps even the life itself of each disabled child, is ultimately due to the work of Teletón and its influx of private capital. The enlivened perpetuation of the childhood as disability equation depends upon such continuous funding, for this is the money that promises to make these children’s lives worth living and to give them value so that they are no longer seen “as good as dead.” This is, after all, the framework through which disability is often viewed in mainstream culture in much of the world: as a death-sentence or condemnation to a fate worse than death.

Similarly, according to Teletón’s narrated video sequences depicting the lives of disabled children and their families, the return to worthwhile, happy life is made possible by contact with the boundless resources of Teletón. Images of Teletón’s state-of-the-art rehabilitation facilities and equipment, massive contemporary architecture and exquisitely groomed landscapes tend to occur at the emotional turning point of the film segments marking a dramatic transition in the life of the disabled child (“María Magdalena”). Just when the child and family members seem to have reached the height of struggle and pain or perhaps when the camera captures tears of sadness and frustration, the scene shifts and the music changes as the family enters the space of rehabilitation and a new chapter in their lives (Alvarajas). These brief windows into Teletón facilities suggest that no expense was spared. Actual costs are not revealed, of course, but instead through the logic of the filmed sequences the investment in rehabilitation is pitted against the suffering of disability. In this equation, rehabilitation must always triumph. Yet because the pathos of the disabled child and the value of that child are infinitely renewable and continuously regenerated, there is no end to the need for investment. The face of the triumphant but fragile child always steals the spotlight, or the close angle frame, instantaneously superceding the number crunching of costs with a smile or the blink of an eye.

The model of private finance that governs Teletón, working in combination with the presence of the state, as discussed above, translates to a dis-

course of abundant resources rather than one of scarcity. Disability, it turns out, is profitable and continues to be so in the context of the Mexican Teletón, in part because of the ways in which the project blurs lines between private and public interests. This uncertain separation between public and private sectors has led to public critique of Teletón, particularly for alleged tax fraud. In considering Televisa's recent response to such critique, I want to highlight the ways in which an explicit confrontation of the uneasy zone of contact between public and private finance impacts the use of images of childhood and disability.

In 2011 Televisa released an advertisement in direct defense of Teletón and in opposition to allegations of tax fraud. The ad attempted to persuade viewers that individual donations to Teletón did not contribute to a corporate tax write-off for Televisa. In other words, Televisa insisted on a clear and proper separation between the public sector, represented by taxation, and the private sector, represented by the television industry and its affiliated charity. One of the results of this discourse was an erasure of the visual trappings that usually characterize Teletón promotions. The message here is emptied of its typical image, the face and body of the disabled child, and in this sense also seems to have displaced its contents. For this child-image, cute despite being disabled, yet at the same time cutely disabled, is the Teletón project: the visual logic of a financial transaction that at once and paradoxically transcends all price tags. Yet in this case, that project-as-image is nowhere to be seen.

The video is filmed on a stark white background with no distinguishing features, and in this sense bears resemblance to the highly successful Apple computer ad campaign, "Get a Mac," and its predecessor the "Switch" campaign ("Apple COMPLETE"). Perhaps in the Teletón video too, the goal is the evocation of precision, clarity, sincerity, and direct identification with the viewer, along with an ironic, humorous edge. The camera focuses on one speaker at a time who appears centered in the frame. The speakers are adult actors, athletes, musicians, media celebrities or business leaders, and none of them is visibly disabled. Initially, the speakers mimic critics of Teletón, who complain about the organization's supposed tax evasion, or who try to justify not contributing, claiming they are tired of seeing the program, or that others already contribute plenty. The tone then shifts to direct endorsement of Teletón and frank, legitimizing explanations of tax deductions. The narrative is directed to a singular viewing public "tú," and then to a collective Mexican solidarity through the repeated slogan "Caminemos juntos."

As the Televisa executives have apparently realized, there is a sector of the public that refuses to watch disabled children asking for money, thus refusing the affective route to their wallets. As one of the video's speakers points out, "you don't have to watch the show if you don't want to. You just have to donate." The structure of financial transaction without images, or a message

sufficiently stripped of images so as to create the impression of a rationally balanced account, works here as part of a particular logic of private finance. In this video, both the speakers and the viewing public refuse the infantilization of a collective Mexico in need of rehabilitation. They instead prefer the clarity and precision of an ostensibly purified argument. The goal is not to remove children from the logic of Teletón, since as the speakers note, all the money is “para los niños.” But this representation of rationally, ethically sound charitable donation does insist on the clearly defined separation of public and private spheres. Televisa and the government must not be seen to inhabit one another’s pockets, nor must Televisa be seen to profit at the children’s and the public’s expense.

Errol Morris, creator of the Apple ads which bear a striking resemblance to this Teletón ad, also designed other film projects with the same white background. These included a series of ads for United Airlines featuring short interviews with real employees of the airline, filmed shortly after 9/11, a short film for the Academy Awards, and a series of ads for the MoveOn.org campaign. This advertising trajectory underscores the versatility of the technique and suggests its efficacy in creating the impression of direct communication without distraction, artifice or other extras. In relation to the use of plain white backgrounds, Morris explains, “Of course, when you try to do something that’s free of artifice, somehow that becomes artificial as well. But I like the idea that there’s something very straightforward about the ads.” The “Switch” ads depict two actors playing the roles of “Mac” and “PC,” and contrast this absurdly artificial characterization with the straightforwardness of the plain white background. The result is a blend of direct truthfulness and quirky humor, apparently convincing to those with a sense of ironic distance from their identification with a given brand of personal computer. The ironic use of the seemingly artifice-free technique suggests the need to appear to be telling the truth, while at once recognizing the viewer’s superior intelligence and critical perception.

In adopting the recognizable advertising technique of “Switch,” or “Get a Mac,” Televisa’s carefully crafted “La verdad sobre Teletón” combines the use of theatrical irony with the candid evocation of truthfulness. The transition in the ad from the impersonation of Teletón critics to the removal of the masks to reveal the “truth” (that Teletón fairly and effectively represents a good cause to which everyone should contribute), enhances the truth-effect of the second part of the ad, without the sense of humor that characterizes the Mac ads, but with their element of irony. The explicit goal of the ad is to clarify both the separation between public and private sectors with respect to Televisa and Teletón, and the legitimacy of the charity. For this reason the ad carefully distinguishes itself from typical Teletón promotions. Rather than selling the cause of disabled children in an explicit sense, “La verdad sobre

Teletón” primarily sells (and defends) itself and therefore refers only indirectly to “los niños.”

By avoiding any and all visual references to children and disability, this advertisement performs a cleansing of the Teletón image and brand, while at once bracketing the figure of the disabled child as legitimate and proprietary to Teletón. And when one of the speakers notes that the public only need to donate, that actually watching the show is not required, he further emphasizes the separation between visual and financial transactions. Keeping images of children out of the picture in the context of the ad allows select (critically informed and privileged) viewers to avoid participating in the freak show-styled structure of the charity telethon, in which seeing becomes equivalent to paying. In other terms, such viewers can contribute without “paying” twice. Similarly, the removal of children here means literally that as far as the viewer can tell, no flesh-and-blood child was involved in or affected by the filming of the ad, and therefore the children on whose behalf Teletón ostensibly works are unsullied by discussions of finance and tax write-offs.

The ad takes a risk in confronting head-on the issue of alleged tax fraud and the distinction between public and private sectors, as when one speaker notes that the rehabilitation of disabled children should be the responsibility of the government, to which others reply that while the government changes every six years, “you and I” are still here and should do something. “La verdad sobre Teletón” thus stakes out a discursive terrain of Mexican civil society as continuous with the charitable, private sector initiative of Teletón, but distinguished—in part through visible and implied markers of race, class, and education—from the spectacle of Teletón itself. The bodies and stories of disabled children, without which Teletón ultimately could not exist, may then continue to circulate through Televisa’s programming and advertising.

An example of such a Teletón advertising spectacle, in contrast to the techniques displayed in “La verdad sobre Teletón,” was released during the same week in November of 2011. In this promotion for the supermarket chain Soriana (a major sponsor of Teletón) viewers see the legs and feet of children, walking or swimming with various assistive devices. The sequences are accompanied by the sound of a supermarket checkout scanner, beeping as it scans a series of products. Images of children taking steps alternate with those of products being scanned for pricing and payment. Finally, the cashier announces to the young couple who are about to pay for their groceries “300 pesos”; and then we see the image of a smiling young boy, walking with assistance and the slogan “caminemos juntos” (Soriana). The replacement of pesos (for the prices of the groceries) with pasos (the assisted steps of the children in rehab) suggests a precise and direct correlation between cost and value or expense and return. The exact calculation of gain may be measured equally well through the movement of the child’s body as through the mechanism of the

checkout scanner, whose rhythmic beeps evoke a hospital heart-rate monitor.

Perhaps the radical differences between the two Teletón advertisement spots described here could be attributed to the fact that Televisa must market to widely different population sectors. Some viewers have read about the alleged tax evasions and are therefore skeptical towards Televisa, while others tend to see the network and its sponsors in a positive light, as providers to the less fortunate. As suggested above, the implied separation between audience sectors in the two advertising styles creates a critical hierarchy between those who recognize and may be convinced by ironic truth-effects and those who are emotionally moved by images and stories of disabled children. In addition, the division appears marked by racialized and class-based distinctions. The celebrities featured in “La verdad sobre Teletón” speak in a more analytic register, and tend to be whiter than the families of disabled children and the rehabilitation technicians who typically appear on the program and its sponsoring advertisements.

At the same time, the two modes of Teletón promotion might be understood as two sides of the same coin. “La verdad sobre Teletón” strips its message of all images of children and incorporates a rhetoric of logical moral and financial accountability in charity, with a touch of playful irony. In this way, the ad allows for the ongoing and emotionally charged display of childhood disability and rehabilitation to justifiably continue, but elsewhere, at other times and for other viewers. In the “Get a Mac” style ad, the discussion and process of payment is made separate from the visual transaction of children on display by keeping such children temporarily out of the picture. In contrast, the display of childhood disability in the Soriana ad is so compelling and so central to the argument that it makes the display of a financial transaction at the supermarket into an emotionally persuasive spectacle, a celebratory freak show in its own right. By making the body and the steps of the disabled child perfectly equal to the cost of his rehabilitation, the pleasure of witnessing this body in its narrative of pathos and triumph extends to and exponentially expands the pleasure of the supermarket purchase.

The juxtaposition of these two Teletón advertisements underscores the complex relationship between the actions of paying and looking, and the related dilemma of veracity in opposition to fraudulence. In the case of freak shows, discussed at the beginning of this essay, the pleasure of the spectacle was derived in part from the purchase of visual “proof” for stories that were difficult to believe. Possible fraudulence was in this sense always built into the structure of the show through a transaction that offered both visual pleasure and access to shocking yet “true” stories. In the Teletón Soriana advertisement, the disabled child’s body is so closely associated with monetary value that the action of spending money literally makes it appear and sets it in motion as a spectacle of rehabilitation. The

advertisement is in this sense also a freak show, offering visual entertainment that is both carried out and made legitimate through a financial transaction.

“La verdad sobre Teletón,” in contrast, erases the children that are nonetheless central to the Teletón enterprise, instead isolating the issue of transparent and morally responsible versus fraudulent financial practices. The plain white background serves to highlight the ostensibly direct and straightforward quality of the message, even while citing an advertising technique that plays with the irony of artifice-free communication. In a sense the speakers in “La verdad sobre Teletón” evoke the figure of the freak show lecturer or mediator of a previous era, who would stand outside the entrance to the show, persuading passersby of the extraordinary and authentic spectacle to be witnessed inside. In referring to bodies hidden behind a curtain or doorway, such a freak show talker would have to rely on rhetorical prowess to conjure the wonder, authenticity and value of the spectacle for sale.¹⁹ Similarly, the actors promoting Teletón become self-referential in their rhetorical technique, yet cannot fail to evoke the Teletón children who remain momentarily out of sight. In both cases the division between the lecture and the unconventional body enhances the spectacular quality and the truth effect of the show.

The duality of the freak show in its separation between convincing rhetoric and visual spectacle builds on the prospective audience’s desire for authenticity and suspicion of fraud. Only through a financial transaction can the words of the lecturer give way to the more tangible, visible proof of bodies on display. In the case of Teletón, the separation between the rhetoric of “truth” and the bodies of disabled children is similarly linked to public concern about fraudulence. Yet more specifically, Televisa’s dual strategy points directly to the uneasy and possibly illicit space of encounter between public and private sectors. The repeated phrase, “Caminemos juntos” expresses the nervous enthusiasm of this encounter. It is an emblematic expression of Mexican neoliberal and televisual discourses of rehabilitation, framed around the bodies of children and their projected, profitable futures.

Notes

1. In this sense the charity campaign upholds what many disability studies scholars refer to as the medical model of disability. See for example Davidson 175.
2. This freak show chronology is borrowed largely from Bogdan, though many other scholars have since documented the history of these performance practices. Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s edited volume includes a final section titled, “Relocations of the Freak Show,” and the author suggests that the display of corporeal difference con-

- tinued in new forms decades after the decline of the freak show itself (“Introduction” 16). See also Adams and Chemers on contemporary forms of the freak show.
- 3 See Garland Thomson, *Staring* for an extensive analysis of the topic of staring. In his reading of the charity telethon, Longmore engages Garland Thomson’s earlier work on staring in relation to disability and spectacle.
 - 4 Zelizer’s book on the history of socio-cultural value attached to children provides useful perspective on the concept of “priceless” children, though within a U.S. context. Zelizer cites Philippe Ariès’ seminal work on the history of childhood, and refers to the nineteenth-century transition towards new sensitivity for the life and death of children (Zelizer 26). Zoila Santiago Antonio also refers to Ariès’ text and its impact in relation to bibliography on the history of childhood in Mexico (33). The work of María Eugenia Sánchez Calleja y Delia Salazar Anaya similarly emphasizes the nineteenth-century sensitivity toward the figure of the child. As an example, one might consider Juan de D. Peza’s 1881 text, in which the author notes: “No hay corazon, por empedernido que le tengan los desengaños y los vicios, que no se conmueva y afecte ante los padecimientos de un niño” (20). In the same work Peza documents the history of charity in Mexico, describing the 1861 transition from church-sponsored charities to the state-run model of *beneficencia pública* during the presidency of Benito Juárez (2). The Mexican Teletón is derived primarily from a U.S. model, yet Mexican histories of attitudes towards charity, childhood, illness and disability are undoubtedly also relevant to understanding its role and impact. It is for this reason important to underscore the key role of the state in Mexican initiatives for the education, protection and well-being of children, and the increasing significance of such initiatives in the post-revolutionary period. On this topic also see Stern, “Responsible Mothers.”
 - 5 The presenter states in reference to the 2011 Teletón: “27 horas, celebrando 15 años de rehabilitar a un país” (Ovando) (27 hours, celebrating 15 years of rehabilitating a country).
 - 6 For an outline history of the Chilean Teletón, see “Primera Teletón.” For reference to Jerry Lewis’ telethon work, see “Teletón, el orgullo de Chile.”
 - 7 For a brief description of the international organization, Oritel (Organización Internacional de Teletones) see Parodi Carbajal.
 - 8 The Teletón Chile website includes discussion of the 1978 “Logremos el milagro” campaign.
 - 9 Also see Antebi and Jorgensen for discussion of the “miracle” reference in the Chilean Teletón.
 - 10 Luis H. Méndez B describes post-1983 neoliberalism in Mexico in terms of, “el auge del mercado, la competitividad y una racionalidad basada en el cálculo de costos y beneficios como medio para acceder a los fines propuestos; un orden donde el aparato de Estado y la política de seguridad social poco a poco se ven reducidos pensando que las fuerzas del mercado son las únicas capaces de resolver los problemas planteados por la sociedad” (7). Yet he also describes the contemporary paradox of Mexican “late modernity” as caught between an earlier nationalist model

- and the rise of the neoliberal era (6).
- 11 An excellent source on the history and activities of Televisa is Fabrizio Mejía Madrid's novel, *Nación TV*, which although a work of fiction, includes extensive journalistic bibliography.
 - 12 See also Cabrera.
 - 13 A popular source for the dissemination of these allegations was a cartoon, "El negocio del Teletón" by the artist El figón.
 - 14 Edelman situates his reading in the context of his work on queer theory and the death drive. If the image of the baby in a heteronormative context signifies hope for the future, Edelman's queer reading prefers "no future" (the title of his book) to obligatory heterosexual reproduction.
 - 15 See for example Alison Kafer's recent *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.
 - 16 Sheila Moeschen's book, *Acts of Conspicuous Compassion*, is an important example of such scholarship, and includes detailed and provocative analysis of Jerry Lewis' telethon.
 - 17 Many scholars have noted connections between the freak show and the charity telethon. See for example Garland Thomson, *Staring*, 166.
 - 18 See Andrade Briseño, et. al., and González Mello and Dorotinsky Alperstein, though it should be noted that the authors do not make use of the term "disability" as such.
 - 19 Bogdan discusses the figure of the freak show talker as external advertiser of the show, though he does point out that such promotion would also include one of the freak exhibits who would emerge from behind the scenes in order to further tempt audiences to buy tickets (94–104).

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