Vargas Llosa’s *La tía Julia y el escribidor*: The New Novel and the Mass Media

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Many of us rely upon compartmentalized conceptions of culture to distinguish such areas as mass culture and high culture. With the rapid development of the mass media in this century, several important writers have forced readers to re-examine these cultural separations. Proceeding beyond the general changes which Walter Benjamin attributed to mass reproduced art, many important twentieth century novelists have overtly joined mass culture to high culture in their writing. Within the Anglo-American tradition, for example the works of writers such as Joyce, Dos Passos, and Mailer question these traditional cultural divisions. In Latin America, novels by Leñero, Cortázar, and Puig proceed even further, requiring that those of us who traditionally study high culture begin to examine the nature of mass culture as well.

Mario Vargas Llosa’s recent novel *La tía Julia y el escribidor* reminds us continually of the difficulty of maintaining such clear-cut divisions. Ostensibly an autobiography of the novelist’s life in the early 1950s when he worked at a radio station in Lima, the novel is structured contrapuntally. The autobiographical chapters are alternated with literary parodies of the radio dramas written by the hackwriter Pedro Camacho and broadcast on the station in those years. Readers who heretofore might have claimed disinterest in or even disdain for mass culture must now come to grips with it throughout an entire novel. In encountering the coexistence of elements from high and mass culture within a single text, one is confronted not only with Vargas Llosa’s well-wrought critique of radio, Peru’s principal electronic medium of the 1950s, but with the writer’s ambivalent attitude toward the mass media as well.

*Media Criticism: Infrastructure and Ideology*

The novel makes an important contribution to media criticism by exposing several aspects of the industry’s infrastructure (i.e., the material conditions of the media’s organization such as ownership and technology) as well as its superstructural role in the formation of ideology. Initially, the chapters of autobiography reveal the day to day relations of production at Radio Panamericana in Lima where Vargas Llosa worked as news director in the 1950s. At the base of these relations, as the writer shows, was the common ownership of Panamericana and its sister station Radio Central by the Genaro father and son team. The concentration of media ownership which Vargas Llosa portrays through the Genaro family points to the pattern characterizing media development not only in Peru but throughout Latin America. Thus, the novel’s portrayal of this infrastructural component of Peruvian radio in the 1950s is an important expose of the contemporary social organization of the media in Latin America and not merely an isolated instance of misuse of a mass medium.

Continuing this critique of the media’s infrastructure, the novelist shows that the father and son owners exaggerated what was an only slightly distinguishable difference between the cultural quality of the two stations. Radio Central was supposedly less “cultural” with fewer news items, much Indian and tropical music, telephone requests and radio dramas. Panamericana, on the other hand, played jazz, rock, classical music and the latest hits from New York and Europe. The owners emphasized these questionable distinctions in quality not only to promote feelings of superiority on the part of one sector of the listening public over another, but to encourage similar sentiments among the workers at the stations. For example, as Genaro-hijo was excitedly announcing that the ratings of Radio Central had gone up twenty percent in two weeks because of the new radio dramas, Vargas Llosa’s assistant, who worked for the sister station Panamericana, asked for a comparable twenty percent salary increase. The owner answered by promoting the spurious cultural distinction between the two stations: “Ustedes no trabajan en Radio Central sino en Panamericana… Nosotros somos una estación de buen gusto y no pasamos radioteatros.” (114). We see clearly that this false cultural hierarchy was used to mask reality: more than likely Genaro-hijo hoped that his employees would forget that these two ostensibly different stations had the same owners who would both benefit from the rise in ratings no matter on which station the radio dramas appeared.

Vargas Llosa as novelist continues to discredit this false cultural hierarchy by an amplified comparison between the content of Panamericana’s news broadcasts and that of Central’s radio
dramas. In the early 1950s the young writer’s job as news director at PanAmericana had consisted of clipping interesting articles from newspapers and editing them to be read on the air. As if this copy of an already inferior model were not bad enough, his assistant, Pascual was “enamoured of catastrophes”, and in every unsupervised moment broadcast the entire news bulletin around scandal items. The affinity between these broadcasts of scandal items and hackwriter Pedro Camacho’s radio dramas at Radio Central is quite apparent to the reader, as we will see. PanAmericana may not have broadcast radio dramas as the owner had boasted, but it did its share to lower the intellectual capacities of the public through these news broadcasts of radio-drama quality.

Another infrastructural component of Peruvian radio in the 1950s which the novel exposes was the market relations of the radio dramas themselves. We learn that the programs were purchased from station CMQ in Cuba owned by the radiotelevision czar, Goar Mestre. Mestre’s high prices as well as linguistic difficulties—Cubanisms which had to be translated into Peruvian expressions—and the loss of or damage to entire chapters in the mail made this market system for mass culture increasingly less desirable for the Peruvian radio station owners. The novel recounts that consequently, in a type of mass cultural import substitution, the owners hired the famous Pedro Camacho to write and produce radio dramas directly at the station. Throughout the novel we see the effects of this substitution on Camacho—his reification in the mass cultural commodities he produced to replace the Cuban radio dramas. In effect, the hackwriter and his work were turned into commodities to substitute for those previously imported from Mestre. In the owner’s words, Camacho “No es un hombre sino una industria.”(17). Though he had begun with four radio dramas per day, due to their success he soon was producing ten daily. This included writing, directing, and sometimes acting in the plays. We are told that Camacho spent at least ten hours per day writing and seven in the studio rehearsing and recording; in effect, he had become a machine for producing radio dramas.

Though the picture of the media’s infrastructure which the novel gives is much more extensive, one further example should be noted. The novelist recounts the important role of the advertising agencies in Latin America as early as the 1950s. The U.S.-owned McCann Erickson, now the largest ad agency in the world is referred to by name. Its Bolivian branch had assured the owners of PanAmericana and Radio Central that Pedro Camacho’s radio dramas had the largest audiences in Bolivia, where the hackwriter had previously worked. Camacho and his mass cultural products were thus a low-risk commodity for which this transnational advertising agency could guarantee good sponsorship in Peru. It is to Vargas Llosa’s credit that he points out these economic relations which lie at the base of Peruvian mass culture.

Several of the ideological effects which resulted from this organization of the Peruvian radio in the 1950s are also delineated in the novel. We have seen, for example, how the pattern of concentration of ownership common not only in Peruvian radio but throughout the Latin American media was ideologically disguised by the pseudo-distinctions the owners made between the cultural quality of the two station. The fragility of this ideological ploy becomes evident as the novel exposes one of the effects of the media on human consciousness. In this case, Vargas Llosa himself, a character in the autobiographical chapters of the novel, is a victim of the media’s confusing lack of real distinction between its programs. Overhearing his assistants recounting a fire, Vargas Llosa assumes it to be a news item. Instead, he is told that it is actually an episode from Camacho’s 11:00 radio drama. There is so little difference between the content of the news bulletins and Camacho’s radio programs that they are easily confused. As Adorno and Horkheimer had pointed out in the early 1940s, the content of mass media programs only appears to change, giving the façade of variety and innovation from program to program. The novel shows that one result of this absence of real variety is the inadvertent confusion of fiction and reality.

It was not only the news which exhibited structural and thematic similarities to the radio drama. Vargas Llosa’s romance with his aunt, Julia Urquidi in the early 1950s began to take on the characteristics of Camacho’s soap operas. Most likely, the reader will relate to the continuing episodes of autobiography which chronicle this “impossible love” with the same responses he or she has learned from the mass media: eager to discover the outcome of the romance, some readers will be annoyed by the technique of serialization which interrupts the flow of the autobiography with parodies of Camacho’s radio dramas, and perhaps will be tempted to skip ahead to the later episodes. As we will see, however, one purpose of the novel’s contrapuntal structure is precisely to check this impatience.

Julia herself is portrayed as a victim of the mass media’s ideology. She analyzes her relationship with Vargas Llosa as if it were a radio drama: “En el mejor de los casos, lo nuestro duraría tres, tal vez unos cuatro años, es decir hasta que encuentres a la
mocosita que será la mamá de tus hijos. Entonces me botarás y tendré que seducir a otro caballero. Y aparece la palabra fin. (206).

Vargas Llosa reminds her that the media's structures and thought patterns which have appeared in Julia's view of the situation show the harmful effects of listening to radio dramas. Julia's reply is that Camacho's soap operas deal with totally different themes and thus are not influencing her in this case. We see in Julia, then both the media's formation of consciousness and the victim's inability to recognize it as such. Human understanding of an event is shaped not only by the content of mass culture but by its form: Julia is convinced that Vargas Llosa will quickly leave her when he meets a younger woman and her vision of this future moment assumes the form of a movie with the words "THE END" appearing on the screen.

**The Media as Narrative Model**

Though the novelist has developed an important critique of the mass media in these sections of autobiography, his ideological ambivalence is also visible in these chapters, as he examines the interconnections between mass culture and art. The relation was a conflicitive one for Vargas Llosa early in his career. In the 1950s and early 1960s, while trying to establish himself as a writer, he had worked at several jobs in the mass media, at one point at as many as seven simultaneously in addition to his law studies. Understandably, a conflict developed between literature and the mass media as each vied for a share in the twenty-four hour day. He finally succeeded in establishing a more workable relationship between art and the mass media by the mid-1960s when he lived during the winters in England and traveled to Peru as a journalist every summer, utilizing these expense-paid trips to do research for his novels.

At the time most of the events in this latest novel took place, Vargas Llosa was still experiencing the conflicitive relation between art and mass culture. Writing in the late 1970s, however, he could not view this conflict as entirely negative: significantly, it had been precisely this arena of conflict between the two cultural modes which had engendered much of his early artistic production. Not without ambivalence, then, this latest novel incorporates the conflict as its subject, critically evaluating the nature of the clash.

Together, the mass media and art had offered the writer a series of narrative possibilities in this early period. The narrative models which filled Vargas Llosa's days at the time might be categorized as follows: 1) the cinematic—the numerous movies he and Julia saw; 2) the journalistic—Pascual's scandal-oriented news bulletins; 3) the radio-dramatic—Pedro Camacho's radio stories; and 4) the literary—Vargas Llosa's own artistic production, the early short stories. For example, though Vargas Llosa was paid to spend time editing his assistant Pascual's news bulletins, he was forced to hide his own artistic production by sneaking moments here and there to work on his stories. Symbolically, Pedro Camacho also exacerbated this conflict for Vargas Llosa: first, he was a full-time writer who was paid to create narratives, and secondly, he insisted that these radio dramas were art.

Though Vargas Llosa was caught in a conflict between the news, the radio dramas, and his own short stories, he derived material for his literary production from this very clash. For instance, Pascual recounted what he insisted was an eyewitness version of young children playing at the airport and being lifted off the ground by the force of airplanes taking off. Relating this "news item" to a film he had recently seen (Buñuel's Los olvidados), Vargas Llosa wrote what he classified a realistic short story. One of his friends, however, insisted that the story was more within the fantastic genre. Even brief reflection upon the difficult-to-believe content of the news item on which Vargas Llosa's early story was based, reveals a similarity to Pedro Camacho's exaggerated radio dramas. Vargas Llosa's early artistic production had taken on the characteristics of three mass cultural representations: the news, the radio drama, and the movies. This influence on Vargas Llosa's artistic production perhaps helps to explain the novelist's ambivalent attitude to the mass media: though certain mass cultural forms presented a conflict for his own artistic production, they sometimes served as the basis of that very art.

Perhaps exacerbating Vargas Llosa's ambivalence toward the mass media even further was a non-conflictive relation he was able to see between three of the four narrative structures. In this case, rather than extrapolating literary material from the mass media, Vargas Llosa imposed the optic of mass culture upon real life events and then began to see the subject for a short story in them. He recounted the process as if it were quite natural, with no overtones of threat or conflict between the mass media and literature.

In one such example, Vargas Llosa refers to his Tía Julia, recently widowed, who had been dating a senator who suffered from sexual impotence. As Julia recounts the history of the senator's problem to Vargas Llosa in the novel, one might have mistaken her story for a soap opera or radio drama: while visiting a
prostitute in the U.S. in his youth, the senator had been interrupted by a deformed robber who took his watch and money at knifepoint. Since this traumatic experience the senator has been unable to have normal sexual relations in spite of numerous medical consultations. Vargas Llosa's first thought upon hearing this soap-opera-like event from real life is that his news assistant Pascual would enthusiastically dedicate an entire news bulletin to the grotesque story. After mentally connecting the narrative and thematic structures of these two media versions of the events, the radio dramatic and the journalistic, Vargas Llosa begins to think again about a short story account of the senator's tale. Perhaps he is consciously recounting this episode in *La tía Julia y el escribido* in order to compare his early literary endeavors to the worst products of the mass media. Whether or not this is the case, certainly, at least, we see the mass media's role in the process of artistic conceptualization of the young writer: a real event with radio dramatic overtones sets off a train of thought connecting the event to Pascual's scandal-oriented news bulletins and finally to the short story Vargas Llosa wants to write. We begin to understand why Vargas Llosa's attitude toward the media is ambivalent: though he can criticize the media's infrastructural organization and negative ideological effects, his early artistic production is indebted to the media on several counts.

The figure of Pedro Camacho is an additional emblem of Vargas Llosa's ambivalence toward the media. In one sense, the novel as a whole might be seen as Vargas Llosa's vindication of Camacho's superior attitude toward the radio plays he produced, or at least the novelist's attempt to come to grips with his own conflicting feelings toward the hackwriter and his mass culture. Camacho, almost a radio-drama machine, insists that his mass cultural production was art. On the day of his arrival, while taking a typewriter from the News Service Office, he tells Vargas Llosa: "El arte es mas importante que tu Servicio de Informaciones, trasgo." (24). While we may be reluctant to classify Camacho's soap operas as art, we can certainly agree that, sadly enough, the news as it was broadcast at Panamericana in the 1950s was certainly not more important that Camacho's dramas.

Camacho's routine of production, in itself, offered Vargas Llosa the chance to assert the hegemony of high culture: in *La tía Julia y el escribido* the novelist would readapt into high culture what Camacho had originally taken from high culture. The hackwriter used what he termed "un viejo compañero de aventuras," a huge volume, "Deiz Mil Citas Literarias de los Cien Mejores Escritores del Mundo," subtitled, "Lo que dijeron Cervantes, Shakespeare, Molière, etc. sobre Dios, la Vida, la Muerte, el Amor, el Sufrimiento, etc., etc." (67). This *Readers Digest* type of literary adaptation was the primary source of Camacho's mass cultural production. While he contended that he was creating art, we might see his radio dramas as adaptations of adaptations. One role of Vargas Llosa's novel, then, is a third adaptation of this material, this time in the direction of the original high cultural source. The novelist parodies Camacho's radio dramas in the short stories appearing as inserts between the episodes of the autobiography. The technique of self-conscious adaptation through parody and exaggeration enables Vargas Llosa to criticize mass culture humorously while introducing it into the mainstream of high cultural production in the tradition of Leñero, Cortázar, and Puig. We will see, however, that through he ultimately asserts the superiority of high culture, Vargas Llosa wavers between high and mass culture throughout the novel.

**Mass Cultural Adaptation of High Culture**

The media's function as a narrative model for Vargas Llosa mediates his clearly critical attitude toward the infrastructure and ideology of the communications industry. The resultant ambivalence of the writer toward the media is visible in the novel's contrapuntal structure in which chapters of autobiography are alternated with parodies of radio serials. The novel is framed by the beginning and ending episodes of this partial autobiography of his life in the early 1950s, followed by a concluding chapter or epilogue briefly summing up the decade following his marriage to his aunt, Julia Urguidi. One effect of this use of the autobiographical frame and epilogue is that the reader responds to the novel primarily as autobiography. Consequently, the alternating chapters of radio drama parody are experienced as interruptions in the main story line. In effect, Vargas Llosa's partial autobiography has been segmented and serialized within the novel. The reader must patiently wait for the next installment, in the mean time reading the exaggerated parodies of Pedro Camacho's radio dramas.

The technique of serialization of an accepted literary genre, the autobiography, in effect allows Vargas Llosa to use the mass media against itself. This critique of mass culture by means of mass cultural techniques occurs in two stages in the novel. At first the serialization functions on its own, instilling the reader with impatience to know the outcome of Vargas Llosa's romance with his Aunt, only then to assuage this impatience as the reader becomes aware of the interaction of all of the novel's parts.
Serialization has been used to check or at least slow down readers who are outcome-oriented.

In referring to the use of the media against itself, I am of course speaking of the literary adaptation of mass media techniques. Used within literature, a media device can have a different effect than it normally does. Unlike the serialization which usually occurs in the mass media (the *follet*it, the daily comic strip, the television soap opera, or weekly series), a novel with internal serialization affords the reader the opportunity to study the entire collection of segments together. At the same time, however, such a collection could also permit the reader to skip over the intervening parodies, giving free reign to the desire to discover the outcome.

Here the distinction between the mere use of the book form and a well-functioning novel is important. If Vargas Llosa had written a book which merely collected segments of a serial, his critique of the mass media would be only minimally effective. (Compare, for example, the paperback novelization of a movie or the fotonovel versions of movies which have recently appeared int he U. S.) At the moment the reader becomes conscious of the essential interplay between the autobiographical sections and the intervening radio-drama parodies, s he has begun to experience the text as literature, not mass culture. Ideally, the reader's response now ceases to be guided by the impatience to know the outcome. Though the book form does enable one to skip the interruptions, the experience of the work as a novel prohibits this.

The autobiographical sections are further connected to mass culture through their affinity to the interview. The publishing industry, certain sectors of the mass media, and many literary academicians have elevated selected contemporary writers such as Vargas Llosa to the level of stars. More so today than at other historical moments, the successful writer is like a movie star, a public figure with a hidden private life. Periodically, elements of this private life are released (indeed, often sold) to the public in installments. Both the autobiography and the interview serve this function of revealing parts of the star's or writer's private life.

Several of Sara Castro-Klarén's observations on the function of the interview also apply to the role of the autobiography in contemporary society. Characterized by Castro-Klarén as an important mainstay of the media, the interview's aim is to make the interviewee reveal personal secrets, capitalizing on the public's assumption that the hidden self equals the real artist. In fact, the interview is often considered more successful, the greater the number of surprises or contradictions it reveals between the public and private self of the celebrity. Here Castro-Klarén has touched upon an important link between the interview and the media. Her argument can be expanded: under the contemporary organization of much of the world's mass media, the interview can only function as a mainstay of the media as long as it shocks or at least surprises the public. Claiming to be constantly innovative, the media define newness in shallow terms, all of which stem from the market system of mass cultural creation and distribution. The media often claim thematic novelty through scandal, the unusual, or the shocking; the illusion of technical innovation and change is usually promoted through rapid camera shifts, changed formats, or new personalities, for example. An interview, too, cannot be successful without contributing to this artificial sense of novelty which the media requires: in most case it must surprise or shock the audience.

In this light, we can begin to understand what might be termed mass cultural aspects of the autobiography. It, too, releases hidden aspects of a figure's private life for private consumption. Its worth is often determined by the number and degree of shocks or surprises it reveals by uncovering these personal details. Indeed, its selling power is frequently this very ability to reveal previously unknown facts about a figure's life.

Underlying this market mechanism, as Castro-Klarén points out with respect to the interview, is the assumption that the interviewee's public acts, such as writing, are insufficient or incomplete versions of the figure's real self. Thus, the interview will uncover the "behind-the-scenes" story of a novel or other public expression. Vargas Llosa's partial autobiography does this: the novel begins to recuperate a mass media function by revealing parts of the public figure's private life, the story behind the famous literature the author has produced. Once again caught in an ideological ambivalence, Vargas Llosa is both affirming and denying the assumption that public literary expression is an incomplete picture of the writer: by telling the story of his life during the mid 1950s, he validates the split between the public and private spheres and the notion that published literature is incomplete, admitting that the story needs to be told. At the same time, the novel attempts to deny this split by joining the previously separate spheres together within one text.

Perhaps this wavering is a symptom of an even more extensive ideological ambivalence, also visible in the autobiography's recuperation of the mass media's functions. For although Vargas Llosa successfully criticizes the mass media in this novel, the affinities with the interview are essentially non-critical. In the context of speculation that the Boom is over, the novelist is
perhaps adapting the autobiography toward mass culture more in an attempt to widen his readership than to novelistically expose a media technique. The industry of mass culture has proven repeatedly the marketability of an autobiography or interview of a public figure. By coupling this popular genre with a happily ending love story, Vargas Llosa perhaps exploits media techniques for his own economic purposes, rather than denouncing their manipulative character.

High Cultural Adaptation of Mass Culture

If the serializations of the autobiographic sections and their thematic critique of the media point to Vargas Llosa's concern with the contemporary mushrooming of the mass media and its effects on high culture, this concern is no less evident in the intervening parodies of radio dramas. By reversing the procedure of the autobiographical sections, this time adapting mass culture into high culture, these parodies function as inversions of the same problematic—the current, often conflicting interrelation between art and mass culture. Again in the parodic sections, and not without contradiction, we see Vargas Llosa's self-assertion as a novelist in the face of the media's growing predominance.

Ostensibly, then, the traditional two voices of parody in these sections are those of the short story and the radio drama. It initially appears that Vargas Llosa is asserting the dominance of a specific literary form, the cuento, over mass culture. Several pieces of textual evidence substantiate this reading of the parodies, a reading which is valid and useful at an initial stage of understanding the novel. To begin with, the parodies are written in the form of short stories rather than as radio drama scripts. Secondly, though the character of Pedro Camacho, the hackwriter of mass culture, is the implied author of these sections, ultimately the mocking voice of Vargas Llosa is implicit in each parody. The writer of high culture is retelling these mass cultural episodes in his own terms. Significantly, the novelist has chosen a particularly weak moment for the media: the hackwriter has broken down like an overworked machine.

Here one can amplify Jean Franco's contention that many of the parodic elements of the Latin American Boom are attempts to rebel against the authority of externally imposed cultural models. The two voices of parody, in Franco's words, the voice of "the other," of authority, and the voice of mockery, of destruction, in Vargas Llosa's case become respectively that of the rapidly growing mass culture and that of a high cultural form intent on reasserting itself despite the media's dominance. In his attempt to discredit this pseudo-cultural force, Vargas Llosa parodies the media at one of its low moments, when mechanisms such as Pedro Camacho have gone awry. Underlying the humor and often grotesque exaggeration of these sections is an implied tone of superiority: the cuentista and his high cultural aesthetic product poke fun at mass culture from a position of prestige and authority. Again Vargas Llosa's ideological ambivalence appears: ironically, throughout the novel this underlying sense of superiority is continually in contradiction with his implicit fear that the mass media's dominance threatens the viability of high culture.

As I noted, this reading of the parody sections represents an initial stage of understanding the novel: the short story asserts itself over mass culture in the ways outlined above. This reading is important not only because it offers a glimpse of a contemporary Latin American novelist's response to the growing predominance of the mass media, but because it reveals how Vargas Llosa's use of the mass media is different from that in the autobiographical sections. Again he seems to waver ideologically. Where serialization together with exposés of the infrastructure and superstructural effects of the mass media were used constructively to combat the effects of the mass media on human consciousness in the autobiography, the mass media is not used positively in the parodies. The extreme exaggerations allow the reader a certain aloofness; one is not caught up in the suspense of the parodies of radio dramas as is the case in the autobiographical sections. This aloofness permits the reader to identify with Vargas Llosa's implicit superiority, instead of allowing an understanding of mass culture from within. In contrast, in the autobiographic sections, while continually caught up in the aspects of mass media, the reader is often at the same time made aware of this very dependence.

The above reading of the parody sections remains incomplete, however, until it takes into account that they are also the writer's self-commentary on his own early short stories. Vargas Llosa signals this intention in various ways, ranging from the specific representation of the character Lituma of the short story, "Un visitante" in several of the parodic sections, to the more general level of thematic repetition of the grotesque throughout the parodies.

In Chapter IV Sargento Lituma has now reached the formulaic "flor de la edad, la cincuentena" and has the exact characteristics of all of Pedro Camacho's male protagonists as they are referred to in the parodies: "frente ancha, nariz aguilera, mirada penetrante, rectitud y bondad en el espíritu." (77). In Vargas Llosa's early short
story, Lituma appeared as an accomplice to the betrayal of a betrayer; the military police used a Jamaican informer to help them make an arrest and then left him behind to most likely be murdered by the prisoner’s friends. Sergeant Lituma did his lieutenant’s bidding and joined his fellow soldiers in laughing at the Jamaican’s plight. In the novel’s parody, Lituma must decide for himself whether or not to follow orders to kill a starving, naked black man whom the police have found running in the streets of Callao. This parody distinguishes itself from the others in the novel by dealing with a serious political theme but it ultimately undercuts itself by employing the light, humorous trappings of the radio serial. At the end, for example, we are left with Lituma pointing his gun at the black:

Pero pasaron dos, tres, varios segundos y no disparaba. ¿Lo haría? ¿Obedecería? ¿Estallaría el disparo? ¿Rodaría sobre las basuras indescifrables el misterioso inmigrante? ¿O le sería perdonada la vida y huritía ciego, salvaje, por las afechas, mientras un sargento irreprochable quedaba allí, en medio de putridos olores y del vatién de las olas, confuso y adolorido por haber fallado a su deber? ¿Cómo terminaría esa tragedia chalacca? (108)

Thus, though we suspect that Lituma has changed or is about to change from the character of the early story “Un visitante,” the conventions of parody which Vargas Llosa is attempting to follow have prevented the ultimate unfolding of this change. One might argue that such an open ending is positive, allowing the reader to analyze the situation and decide how Lituma would finally act. In the context of the novel, however, this question is most likely not pondered because one is immediately reimmersed in Vargas Llosa’s autobiography on the following page.

Later this parody will itself be parodied. In Chapter XIV Jaime Concha, who had previously ordered Lituma to shoot the black man, now appears as a neighborhood curandero. We are told that he had resigned from the Guardia Civil after being ordered to execute a poor Oriental who had arrived in Callao. In Chapter XVI the facts again change: Concha is now a sergeant, Lituma is his Captain, and vague allusions are made to the black man’s having been allowed to escape that night when a sergeant was to execute him. At this point Concha does shoot the black, and, according to the confused text, is thereby fulfilling the previously received order. Thus, Lituma’s important decision, unresolved in the open ending of Chapter IV, has been deflected into examples of Pedro Camacho’s character mistakes as his writing skills deteriorated. Parodic humor has again led us away from serious consideration of the social issues involved in Lituma’s decision.

Other links between Vargas Llosa’s early short stories and the parodies are the grotesque elements common to both. In the story “El abuelo” the grandfather experiences perverse pleasure in seeing his grandson’s fright before the flaming skull which the old man has deliberately arranged to scare the boy. A comparable perversity occurs in another story, “El hermano menor” in which the character, Juan, as he advances to shoot an Indian with whom his brother is fighting, experiences serenity when realizing that he might accidentally kill his brother as well. (This story also offers a more specific comparison to the parody in chapter VI in which a young girl accuses Gumerindo Tello of raping her. In “El hermano menor” Juan murders an Indian, only later learning that his sister’s accusation that the Indian had raped her is false.) Other examples which verge on the grotesque include Leonidas in “El desafío” who passively watches his son die in a knife fight, in effect consenting to the death by refusing to stop the fight when the opponent asks him to do so, and the compulsion of Rubén and Miguel in “Día domingo” as they insist on swimming a race in the ocean one night in mid-winter after a drinking contest.

These events are not repeated specifically in the novel but they recur in kind. One senses that many of the grotesque exaggerations of the parodies are commentaries not only on mass culture but on these very events from Vargas Llosa’s early stories as well. For example, Gumerindo Tello, the Jehovah’s Witness accused of raping the young girl in Chapter VI, threatens to castrate himself to prove his innocence. In episode VIII we read of Don Federico Tellez Unzategui, who has dedicated his life to exterminating all of the rodents in the nation, in order to compensate for the death of his small sister. Tellez had been in charge of watching her when they were young but had fallen asleep. When he awoke she had been eaten alive by rats. As Pedro Camacho begins to mix characters and events in the various radio dramas, the grotesque events become more unbelievable, often verging on the fantastic or Gothic.

In effect, Vargas Llosa is using parody not only to humorously denigrate mass cultural elements but aspects of his early short stories as well. Thus, the initial contention that the author is asserting the dominance of the short story over mass culture becomes problematic. Here the functioning of the novel as a whole is essential to fully understand the role of parody. At this second level of meaning, then, Vargas Llosa is attempting to assert the importance of one specific high cultural genre, the novel, over that of mass culture (the radio dramas) through these parodies. (A
similar intention might have partially inspired the grotesque and mass media elements of *Pantaleón y las visitadoras*, though in this earlier novel the grotesque elements are not obviously parodic of his early short stories.) Once again, the reader’s experience of the novel primarily as autobiography is important. As chapters of a novel-autobiography, the parodies are not solely about mass culture or examples of Pedro Camacho’s breakdown but also about Vargas Llosa’s literary attempts in the 1950s and his progression to the novel in his post-1950s writing. As previously noted, these early literary products were intimately connected to the mass media and Camacho’s radio dramas. What is straightforwardly related in the autobiographic sections is substantiated and indirectly communicated through the parodies. If Camacho exacerbated the conflict between art and mass culture by insisting that his radio dramas were art, Vargas Llosa will attempt to obliterate this conflict (or at least render it innocuous) by rewriting Camacho’s radio dramas as art. The novel can thus encompass both the writer’s early literary production and the threat posed by mass culture as well.

In the end, one senses that Vargas Llosa’s primary concern is more with the revitalization of the novel as a genre than with the criticism of the mass media. Perhaps he saw the latter as a means to the former. Certainly the novel succeeds in exposing many of the ideological effects of the mass media on human consciousness and several aspects of the infrastructural organization of the communications industry. It also examines the relations between art and mass culture in contemporary society and effectively uses the media against itself in the autobiographic sections. Clearly the novel has achieved positive results in these respects. Though its readership will undoubtedly be small in comparison the the millions of people whose daily lives are affected by the mass media, at the very least it will increase the new novel reader’s consciousness of the mass media in contemporary Latin American society. At the same time, the ambivalence toward the media which Vargas Llosa demonstrated at times in the novel tends to obscure the critique and suggests that he was interested in criticizing the media primarily as a means of novelistic experimentation.