

## REVIEW

### Trivial or Valid? On Class Conflict and Envy in Prime Video's *Cochina Envidia*

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The Colombian mini-series *Cochina Envidia* was released in late 2022 on the global streaming platform Prime Video.<sup>1</sup> The series, adapted from Carolina Cuervo's play *Veneno* (2012), focuses on four upper-middle-class friends in their early forties—Ana (played by Cuervo), María, Tina, and Flora—who gather to celebrate after María wins a prestigious literary award from Spain.<sup>2</sup> María (played by Ana María Orozco, who is known for the role of Betty in the classic *telenovela*, *Yo soy Betty, la fea*)<sup>3</sup> is an engineer by profession. Her success is the object of Ana's envy, as Ana is a writer who refuses to “sell herself” to commercial publishers. Ana and María's relationship is complicated by Flora; in addition to being Ana's sister, Flora is the editor who publishes María's award-winning novel, although she does so only after implementing a few changes to make the text more relatable to the public. Tina, who is often reduced to being Flora's “sidekick” (Ana calls her “Sancho,” alluding to Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*), is a humorous character who provides comic relief. Tina does not read María's book, telling Flora she has never read anything that long because she is too lazy.

*Cochina Envidia* is different from other series in the array of Colombian television produced for and currently available on streaming platforms. Most Colombian productions currently available on Netflix, HBO Max (Warner Bros. Discovery), and

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Spanish to English, the title of the series is *Filthy Envy*. All translations in this text are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Title translates to *Poison*.

<sup>3</sup> Title translates to *Ugly Betty*.

Prime Video (Amazon) can be broadly categorized into three genres: *telenovela*, narco thriller, and drama (often historical).<sup>4</sup> With their conventional plotlines, these dominant streaming genres draw on specific tropes of Latin American television: the *sicario*, or hitman; the drug lord; and the overly sexualized and racialized female character (e.g., the lover or prostitute) in conflict with the virtuous female character (e.g., the “virgin” wife). *Cochina Envidia* moves away from these tropes and plotlines and falls into different ones. The series is more reminiscent of (situational) comedies produced in the Anglophone world, such as the popular American TV series *Sex and the City*, or the comedy, *Girls*. As *Cochina Envidia* is a series about friendship and envy in the Colombian upper-middle class, it is at first strange to find oneself looking to American television in an attempt to situate the series in familiar territory. But without these other conventional plotlines of the American comedy, the series’ greatest achievement would probably not have been possible: the dramatization of envy through sensory experience. By drawing inspiration from American television, *Cochina Envidia* not only takes on a radically different subject from that of mainstream Colombian television but also provides a novel approach to the subject of envy.

*Cochina Envidia* dramatizes feelings of envy through sensory experiences such as touch and taste. This is relevant as the series revolves around a celebratory dinner that Ana organizes after asserting that she is a better cook than María. Each of *Cochina Envidia*’s six episodes is titled after a different element of a meal: episode one is “Ingredients and Recipe” and the final episode is “Dessert.” *Cochina Envidia*’s intimate portrayal of envy between friends is not only entertaining: it makes one wonder what emotions, especially emotions understood as undesirable, have to do with the senses.

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<sup>4</sup> See Netflix’s *Narcos* (narco thriller) and *Bolívar* (historical drama); *Los caballeros las prefieren brutas* or, *Gentlemen prefer them dumb* (*telenovela* originally produced by Sony and Caracol, now streaming on Prime Video); and HBO Max’s *Mil Colmillos* or, *A Thousand Fangs* (narco thriller).

As with other “negative” emotions, public discourse does little to critically engage with envy. Perhaps because it is undesirable, envy is kept in the private realm of negative feelings. And yet, critical engagement with “negative” emotions (e.g., envy, anger, disgust) does take place in certain contexts. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), for instance, the literary scholar Sianne Ngai studies the political work done by “negative” emotions like paranoia, irritation, and envy and their affective capacity to problematize certain registers of social life.<sup>5</sup> Taking a different approach, Richard H. Smith and Sung Hee Kim review psychological research on envy and discuss the difficulty of arriving at a single definition of the emotion.<sup>6</sup> Despite this difficulty, Smith and Kim categorize envy as a generally unpleasant, painful, and hostile emotion.<sup>7</sup>

*Cochina Envidia* begins from the notion that envy is unpleasant, undesirable, and even shameful. One of the first scenes in the series shows Ana sitting on the toilet with María’s novel, just after watching news of her friend’s achievement on TV. Ana drops the novel and picks up her own unpublished manuscript, ripping it apart before turning towards the camera and breaking the fourth wall: “Yes,” she declares. “I feel envious. Pure envy. What? Don’t look at me like that. I know it’s a terrible word and we should act as if it doesn’t exist. But I know you feel it too.”<sup>8</sup> Characters in the series often break the fourth wall to make confessions. Since envy is a shameful emotion, the four friends cannot turn towards each other and admit their feelings; in turning towards the viewer and even asking the viewer rhetorical questions, the characters implicate the viewer directly, eliciting the viewer’s own reflection on feelings of envy.

Ana focuses passionately on creating the perfect dinner to celebrate María. In doing so, she channels her envy into a task at which she is more skilled than her friend. The rest of the series explores the dynamics of the relationship between Ana and María. In this way, Ana’s kitchen is a place where envy can move around.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ugly Feelings*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Comprehending Envy,” 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> “Ingredientes y receta,” 03:17.

Throughout the first episode of the series, the viewer attentively follows Ana's hands as she bakes a blueberry cheesecake. The viewer hears the sounds of Ana's hands crunching nuts, battering eggs, and mixing dry and wet ingredients. Then the viewer hears the careful splash of blueberries, dropping one by one into water, and again the sound of Ana's hands mixing all of the ingredients together. While the viewer perceives these sights and sounds, Tina's voice resonates in the background. Tina tells Flora: "If I had to choose which one of us, on any day, would kill the others, I would say it's Ana."<sup>9</sup> We see the textures of food form under Ana's hands, and we hear each step in the cooking process until dessert is finished and satisfaction overcomes her. Then Ana makes a second cheesecake, this time strawberry. She also adds a dash of insecticide to the second cheesecake. "Have you never had the urge to do something like this?" Ana asks the viewer. "Ah, right, this doesn't happen to you. You probably never shit either, right?"<sup>10</sup>

Ana channels her envy into senses that affect the atmosphere of her home. The dramatization of her cooking process exposes the ways envy moves in an environment, always obsessed with its subject. If there is any agreement amongst the definitions of envy that Smith and Kim present, it is that envy relies on antagonism: this hostile feeling results from awareness of another group or person that enjoys what one desires.<sup>11</sup> Envy must always be directed at something. For Ngai, envy has the potential to address social inequalities precisely because of its characteristic antagonism: the object of envy can result from a perceived inequality.<sup>12</sup> However, Ngai also writes that envy is usually understood "as a static sign of deficiency rather than a motivated affective stance."<sup>13</sup> The envious subject is therefore often perceived as egotistical, and the antagonism is erased.

Although *Cochina Envidia* is certainly grounded in an antagonistic relationship, the series fails to represent this

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, 16:58.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, 19:38.

<sup>11</sup> "Comprehending Envy," 47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ugly Feelings*, 128.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, 127.

relationship in ways that raise the questions Ngai finds most enriching in her critical analysis of envy. One reason for this failure is that *Cochina Envidia* is only concerned with Bogotá's upper-middle class, failing to reach out to other spheres of Colombian society. It is thus difficult to see how Ana's discourse could be exposing a social injustice: both she and María have had equal opportunities to develop their careers. While Ana attributes María's success to having "sold herself to the market," others, such as Flora, might argue Ana is idealistic and stubborn. Though this suggests that the workings of envy in *Cochina Envidia* are limited, the series does not entirely reduce envy to egotism or hysteria, a minimization that Ngai warns against.

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The tradition of *telenovelas* and subsequent *narco-novelas* is an enduring influence on Latin American television, making it significant that *Cochina Envidia* moves away from these genres. Since the late 1950s, telenovelas are often associated with Mexican television. According to Hugo Benavides' entry on "Mexican Telenovelas" in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, these programs "inherited the melodrama" of earlier *radio-novelas* and *folletines* (pamphlet novels).<sup>14</sup> While melodramatic plotlines written for middle-class viewers and grounded in romance (such as forbidden love and tragic love) were once the main drivers of telenovelas, plotlines subsequently developed to include "overblown plots, overt sexual content, (usually including nudity), and subjects chosen for controversy and scandal, such as deception, incest, murder, and adultery."<sup>15</sup> The emergence of narco-novelas in the early 2000s brought drug-themed plotlines into the traditional telenovela narrative, adding elements of violence, national-political discourses on the drug trade, and international events between Mexico, the United States, and as of recently, Colombia. The relation between these countries as portrayed in the media also affects the international distribution of

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<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, s.v. "Mexican Telenovelas."

<sup>15</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "telenovela."

narco-novelas: “The Colombian connection thus links the earliest influences of narco-representation and the telenovela genre to the rest of the Spanish-speaking American continent,” writes Benavides.<sup>16</sup>

It appears that the very real elements of the drug trade in Latin America—particularly in Mexico and Colombia—gave television an endless supply of source material for conjuring dramatic and thrilling stories. The drug trade also contributed to what has been termed narcoculture: a body of cultural meanings and representations associated with the industry. As a comedy-drama portraying four female friends, *Cochina Envidia* steps away from this heritage, embracing other subject matters that have not been completely absorbed by narcoculture. In fact, the television genre that acts as the backbone of *Cochina Envidia* is the situation comedy: a genre independent of and with a radically different history from telenovelas and narco-novelas. The *sitcom*, which originated in American radio of the 1920s, emerged as a television genre in the 1950s. Sitcoms are known for their short, 30-minute episodes that draw comedic value from relations between friends, family, or other groups in a shared and recurring social space. The “stock situations” of sitcoms are usually “easily recognizable to members of a culture or interpretative community as ‘typical’ scenarios.”<sup>17</sup>

Excluding flashbacks, the six episodes of *Cochina Envidia* take place in Ana’s home, where the increasingly drunken friends turn a night of celebration into one of emotional turmoil and tension. Middle and upper-middle-class Colombian audiences may identify with some of the characters’ experiences and the series’ comedic referents; a running joke throughout the series, for instance, refers to the types of alcoholic beverages that the friends drink. In the first episode, Tina brings Ana a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Ana rejects this, stating that Sauvignon Blanc does not pair with the meal: she needs a Chardonnay. (Ana mocks Tina’s pronunciation of “Chardonnay” to the camera.) Tina goes back to

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<sup>16</sup> *Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, s.v. “Mexican Telenovelas.”

<sup>17</sup> Chandler and Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, s.v. “stock situations.”

the grocery store after Ana insists on the importance of celebrating María with the right wine. The irony of it all is that when María arrives, she only wants *aguardiente*: a popular Colombian drink made from anise and sugar cane, commonly known as *guaro*. Mocking María's taste, Ana states: "There is no aguardiente here. That's such a tacky drink."<sup>18</sup>

Entering the terrain of the sitcom allows *Cochina Envidia* to comedically exploit a friendship grounded on envy in a particular societal and class-based context. Nonetheless, the series does use a few elements from the genre of the thriller, including suspense. Suspense is introduced from the moment Ana decides to add insecticide to María's favorite dessert and Tina states she believes Ana is capable of killing one of the friends in the group. Ana is the Yolanda Saldívar of the group, according to Tina.<sup>19</sup> She mentions this to Flora while smoking weed in her car, hoping to escape for a while from Ana's house. And although it is a violent reference, mentioning Yolanda Saldívar is intended as a hyperbole of envy rather than a desire to commit violence. We return to this thrilling element in the last episode of the series, when Ana brings out the blueberry cheesecake with a knife in her hand. Although the viewer knows this cheesecake is not poisoned, the characters do not. Ana locks her friends inside the house and refuses to let them leave until they eat it.

The viewer only arrives at this thrilling conclusion to the series after having navigated the envious relationship between Ana and María across the six episodes. On the one hand, the dramatization of the cooking process allows envy to move (via touch and sound, for instance) through Ana's home, saturating the dinner party. On the other hand, the other people present in that atmosphere—Tina, María, Flora—react to this feeling that has now permeated them. In *The Transmission of Affect*, the late Australian philosopher Teresa Brennan opens with the following question: "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the

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<sup>18</sup> "Aperitivos," 00:28.

<sup>19</sup> Yolanda Saldívar is an American woman who was convicted of the murder of Selena, the famous Mexican singer, in 1995.

atmosphere?”<sup>20</sup> She continues: “The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate *sui generis*: it did not develop solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes.”<sup>21</sup> Brennan terms this process the “transmission of affect.”<sup>22</sup> It is revealing to study the transmission of affect when the affect in question is envy. This is because envy is commonly understood as negative and undesirable and because limited scholarship exists on the subject. This is, in fact, what *Cochina Envidia* is about: finding a place for envy where it is constantly rejected.

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After Ana locks her friends in the house, she begins cutting the blueberry cheesecake into pieces. As we again hear the crunching and wobbling of the cheesecake, Ana unfolds into a monologue about what each of them desires that another person possesses. Tina, already feeling claustrophobic after being locked in, anxiously binge-eats the cake in response. The scene is both grotesque and comedic: as Flora, Ana, and María begin to fight and Flora is accidentally stabbed, Tina vomits the cake, declaring it poisoned. We hear the pieces falling from her mouth: *Plop. Plop. Plop.* Although in fact the cake is not poisoned, it serves as an image of envy: just like other “negative” emotions, envy must have an outlet. Otherwise, it gets stuck, poisoning the self.

Underlying the main plotline of *Cochina Envidia* is the question of when envious feeling is valid and when it is not. This question has to do with some of the other questions—mainly rhetorical—posed to the viewer about social dynamics in a society stratified by class and race. For instance, Flora expresses to Tina that, as a black woman, she has had to work incredibly hard to attain

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<sup>20</sup> *The Transmission of Affect*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Following Brennan, I find it insightful to think about the relation between the senses and the transmission of affect. I have written elsewhere on this subject: Copello-Duque, “Affective Methodologies.”



a senior position at a publishing company. Her sister, Ana, is white; she is married to a “lazy man” and lives off her father’s money as she pursues her dream of writing. Flora is excluded from this heritage because her father believes that she is a very successful professional who does not need it. The tense relationship between Ana and Flora thus exemplifies the type of envy that Sianne Ngai finds most productive: “a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities.”<sup>23</sup> Ana will always benefit from her father’s coddling, and neither Ana nor her father recognize that Flora might also want financial or emotional support from her family. Does Flora’s independence indeed mean she has no need or desire for the financial support of her family? The tension between the sisters leads to conflict when their father announces to them that Ana will be the sole inheritor of their family home. Flora immediately states that she is pregnant, even though she does not intend to keep the pregnancy; rather, this is Flora’s attempt to balance an unfair family relationship, given that she knows Ana has been unsuccessfully trying to get pregnant.

Since Ana and Flora’s relationship exposes many more instances of envy as an agonistic emotion that can denounce social inequalities, it is unfortunate that the series is grounded on Ana and María’s relationship, failing to address some of the critical questions the series initially posed to the viewer. As represented in the series, envy can therefore also seem devoid of significance. Ngai has warned against this, noting that envy is too quickly associated with egotism, pettiness, and even hysteria. And yet, Ana’s envy is petty: it represents the trifling discourses of the Colombian upper-middle class surrounding success, elitism, and condescension. Perhaps the series does this too well, thus overlooking more significant discourses about social dynamics in Bogotá. Nonetheless, *Cochina Envidia* gives the viewer a novel take on envy and friendship: envy must be allowed to move, and it must be communicated. Otherwise, it becomes a poison.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ugly Feelings*, 128.

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