

# How fiction consumes serialized fiction: Radionovelas, telenovelas and contemporary Latin American narrative

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## Abstract

This article looks at the curious reciprocal relationship between soap operas and Latin American literature. The success of Latin American telenovelas, nationally and abroad, leads fiction writers to see them as a competitor narrative genre. For critical theory, this genre also defies theoretical paradigms. Thus, the text starts by summarizing universal and particular critical theories about melodrama, from which soap writing is considered a derivative. Secondly, the article shows examples of the reading of telenovela by contemporary fiction writers of Latin America, stressing that they found a way to transform their competitor into an experimental tool.

The soap opera today offers to the researcher a bibliographic theme as extensive as the stories it narrates. A quick glance at University libraries attests to the multiplication of publications on the subject in the last decade. The number of books has grown three times, mostly in the field of literature, media studies and humanities in general. In addition, the soap opera genre defies the theoretical paradigms. At a time when universalistic theories are put into question, the worldwide success of the soap operas defies any research on it merely by a particularistic perspective.

The literary and philosophical studies offer, in first place, an answer that is universalistic. Watching the soap opera as a narrative genre, one is aware that its success is based on the "melodramatic imagination" (Brooks 1995). From the farthest ancestor of melodrama in the 18th century would stem the focus on passionate love that is in the radio and television soaps of the 20th century. In the 20th century, soap opera fiction went on to achieve the position of "second class fiction". This is the analysis that Beatriz Sarlo sustains (1985). According to Sarlo, the "sentimental culture" is in opposition to the highbrow aesthetic. "In the cultivated tradition, when hegemony of passionate love is bred, it is always unstable, influenced by other feelings that are linked to the economy, to politics, to social status, to the mundane intellectual success" (1985, p. 86). In sentimental literature, on the contrary, the whole narrative centers on passionate love, a feeling that is understood in a stereotypical manner. It originates, most of the time, from endless suffering on the characters involved.

Finding the melodrama along with this type of "aesthetics of hysteria", Peter Brooks includes tears in the "mode of excess", which, according to him, is characterized as a literary genre. Following a tradition, which studies the melodrama according to its theatrical expression, Brooks finds the secret of the popularity of the melodrama in the excessive gesture, histrionic and hyperbolic. Stanley Cavell, one of the most important living philosophers in the U.S., sustains that, on the contrary, the popularity of the melodrama resides in its demonstration of the "poverty and the pathos of all expression" (Cavell 1996, p. 40). That which marks it is not an excessive theatricality, but the despair in face of the "terror of the absolute impossibility inexpressiveness" (Cavell 1996, p. 43) in the banal and ordinary daily life.

It is interesting to note how Cavell's position, anchored in philosophy, especially that of Wittgenstein, is to coincide with the perspective of some scholars of communication studies. Roman Gubern (1988), who, like Cavell, studies the melodrama present in film, arrives at similar conclusions. According to Gubern, the exacerbated feeling exhaled by the melodrama "gives greatness to the spectators' daily afflictions, who in this manner affirm their "superiority" over others who are incapable of the same intensity of feeling (Gubern, 1988, p. 244).

On the other hand the particularistic criticism defends that, yes, it must find specifically Latin American

traces of the soap operas. In the last ten years, the Latin American media scholarship is centered on its reception. As in the case of Jesus Martín-Barbero (1993), it is attributed to mass media of the continent, the role of mediation between the traditional cultures and the modern subject (Martín-Barbero 1993). Carlos Monsiváis saw in Mexican cinematographic melodrama, one of the Latin American soap opera's ancestors, a sort of pedagogy to the peasants recently settled in the cities (1997, p. 91). Monsiváis includes kitsch, a strong component of the soap operas, in the manifestations of the popular urban culture (by extension we can thus classify the soap operas), a concept that articulates old categories of the elite culture, mass culture and popular culture in a new type of culture, whose permanent interaction with the three categories does not constitute a new synthesis (Santos 2001, 151- 204).

To both scholars, the experience of the Latin American brand of populism has offered the subaltern more benefits than losses. The implementation of the consumerist society in Latin America during the 1960's, followed by the globalization of the mass culture market, amplified the process. According to Barbero and Monsiváis, popular urban culture in the large Latin American cities is characterized since then by a permanent recycling of habits and behaviors.

Despite the difference in its foundations, this brand of Latin American criticism is connected to the philosophical perspective of Cavell, that which is based on the presence of the soap opera in daily life. Latin American writers had already noted its presence. Some authors, like the Brazilian Roberto Drummond, transpose the realization to the literary language, indicating how literature anticipates many times the hypothesis in human and social sciences (Santos, 2001, p. 24). Let's listen to the narrator: "He will follow the soap opera. He will be waiting for tomorrow to come sooner. So as to know what will happen between Leonor and Rodolfo in the soap opera. And he will be alive" (Drummond 1982, p. 61).

Meanwhile, this line of criticism seems insufficient in regards to analyzing novels of as such as *How I Became a Nun*, by the Argentinean Cesar Aira (1996). How is one to approach a narrative that does not even define the narrator's gender? Better, that contradicts the title already in the first chapter, when all the characters are directed to the narrator in the masculine voice, while the same affirms its identity in the feminine? How can all the theories about the insertion of the soap opera in daily life help understand a plot in which the narrator dies at the age of six, after having referred to something he had learned at fourteen, after having pursued the religious vocation of a nun that was cut short with her death at the end of the novel? In an enigmatic chapter that occupies the middle of the book, the narrator describes how he/she spent his/her afternoons, listening to the radio, where the programming focused almost exclusively on soap operas. In them the narrator admits to having admired the "floating complication" of the plot. The narrator even confesses to have extracted from the soap operas "the golden rule of fiction: it is too complicated to not be right" (1996, p. 65).

Within the same novel there is an example of this practice and critical theories are not enough to analyze them. The title--a parody in abysm, once the parody in the pornographic tales written for masculine consumption, which in turn parodies the religious confessions of the 18th century – prepares the reader for a biographical account, at the same time, for a formational novel. Already in the first chapter there is a crisis of representation, what we could interpret with the rebuffs that Paul De Man (1984) presented to the theories of Lejeune (1975). At first, for refusing any possibility of an autobiographic pact between the author and the reader. Although the name that is on the cover is the same as the character of the narrator. They, according to Lejeune's theory, would assure the legality of the contract between the author and the reader, the latter having realized that he was prey to a trap. Although the direct discourse of the other characters is directed towards the narrator in the masculine form, the latter introduces him/herself in the feminine. If, by trying to find a solution to the enigma, the reader searches for the author's biography, confirming that the name of the city where Cesar Aira was is the same as that which is used by the narrator in the novel. On the other hand, the complete name of Aira appears through the words of his first teacher. The reader concludes, through these investigations, that he/she cannot verify the authenticity of the narrator's signature. In the narrative, it is not present, either, as sustained by De Man, an intention of creating an autobiographical fiction.

We could still try to approach these oscillations as the emptiness foreseen by the theory of reception by Iser, especially when we are aware that these empty spaces gather, adding to the negation. According

to Iser's theory, the narrator denies information earlier given to the reader (Iser 1976, 365) . Considering other denials, be it the declaration that "all of this which has I told has happened is based on my perfect memory" after having affirmed, in the chapter before, that "my memory went blank", perhaps one is able to arrive at a new possibility to succeed the complications of the novel. The author completes the affirmation as follows:

Oh well, my memory blends in with that of the radio. Or rather: I am the radio. Thanks to the faultless perfection of my memory, I am the radio that winter. [...] My memory contains everything, but the radio is a memory that contains itself and I am the radio (1976, p. 67- 68).

Considering "the retortion" of style, which some critics attribute to Aira, it is possible to understand how the radio is configured (Contreras, 1998) . At first, it can function as the explanation to the oscillation of the genre of the narrator. Going on to share the domestic experiences with the mother, the radio inscribes the narrator in the "world of mothers", which is the "new experience" of the narrator after the arrest of the father, condemned for a murder he committed in the first chapter. The soap opera is described as the most important transmission, not only because it gave back to the two characters the insertion in daily life of the ordinary, if not mostly because it presented the narrator with the learning of the floating complication of these stories without "basis mechanism". Says the narrator: "the radio transmission was different everyday. Each time it repeated itself"(p. 69) the sensation of continuum shows that the use of the radio in the novel does not stop in the themes it touches. What Aira is experimenting with in *How I Became a Nun* is how to transfer to the fiction the acceleration of the present produced by the electronic media. The sensation of estrangement of the reader comes from the recognition that such successes could not occur in the condensed rhythm that the novel carries. In time it is transformed into a continuous flow, complementary to the fragmentation of the family life. The immediate intention is to reach the speed of the serial story, much more than its content. Thus, some thematic knots, searched not only in the radio soaps but also in police stories, are repeated: there are murders and persecutions, there is a predominance of the atmospheres of film noir and there are illnesses typical of feuilleton. With these data, the reader may recognize the terrain into which he/she steps and accept warmly the fictional game in which he/she is invited to appear.

A similar concept is present in the novel *The Hour of the Star*, by the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, in which the only cultural consumption of the main character is the clock radio, a radio station in Rio de Janeiro that transmits the precise hour from the National Observatory each minute, alternating it with trivia known in the Brazilian universe as "useless knowledge"(Lispector 1993) . The recycling of the Clock Radio programming allows Lispector a second level of articulation. Through this second level of articulation, the protagonist's time is stopped in the eternal present of the electronic apparatus, giving evidence that the author perceived ahead of time the crisis of representation, caused by phenomena such as globalization and the concept of space-time implied in the media. According to the narrator in respect to the his hesitations to start the narration of Macabea's history: "the story which soon will have to begin is written with the underwriting of the world's most popular soft drink, which nonetheless pays me nothing, soft drink which is spread through all countries"(p. 24). After having mentioned the "servile and submissiveness" with which the consumers of the world love the soft drink, the author concludes: "Also because - and I will say now something difficult which I only can understand - because this drink that has cocaine is today. It is the medium that is available for a person to step into the present time"(p. 24). The subordination of this concept to physics, which substitutes, in postmodernism, the reflections based on the mechanics of modernism, is also made explicit. The author says in her dedication: "And - and not to forget that the structure of the atom is not seen but it is known. I know many things that I myself haven't seen. And you too"(p. 10).

Thus, Coke is fundamentally an allegory of the globalization, a word only incorporated into critical thought many years later. However, its utilization in the context of the novel can be read as part of the rhetoric of mass culture, which Lispector also practices along the text. In it there is the parody of the Hollywood melodrama *A Star Is Born* once the "hour of the star" of somebody, according to the narrator, is the time of death. Beyond that, the development of the plot is composed as a romance novel: the love-delusion of a happy future by a psychic and death caused by the prince of prediction that she had just received. Words charged with a melodramatic connotation, such as happiness, or proverbs and even legends are

incorporated into the tale. As a group, these data confirm the basis of the refusal of realism. The protagonist Macabea is constructed through a satire of the realistic process. After maintaining that to Macabea the word reality meant nothing, the narrator concludes "To me neither, for God"(p. 49).

With a similar phrase, Manuel Puig, of whom Aira says to be a disciple, marks the atmosphere he desires for his play *Under a Mantel of Stars* (Puig 1997) . Describing the scenario where the action will take place, Puig says: "Nothing is realistic, everything is stylized". The development of the play confirms that Puig had an important role in learning the art of the "complication" based on serial fiction of the media by Cesar Aira. In these three authors the complication is transformed into a literary technique. I employ the word technique with the intention of highlighting the understanding of literature as a tekhné by these authors, that is to say, as "art", in which it is also implied the idea of experimentation. To understand literature in this manner means to realize that the different modernisms are produced at the core of the modernizations. That the concepts of time and space are not the same as in the beginning of the 20th century, when the textual experiments inspired by film arose from mechanics. Those which bring the electronic media to literature is the perception that the post-modern space is a time-space measured by electronic communication, that operate in the speed of light, concepts supported by critical theory, from Virilio to Derrida.

When Puig, for instance, superimposes in *Under a Mantle of Stars* various characters in two of the different temporal moments, he is in reality engaging in mimesis, not of a literary sub genre, if not of the temporal-spatial flux with which the images of this fiction arrive to the spectator. It is worth highlighting that the radio soap opera is only cited twice during the play, even as the plot carries many of the characteristics of classical melodrama. The space, for instance, recalls the lodging that was the space par excellence in the melodrama of the 18th century. It is as lodge that the gathering of visitors treats the "house owner's" home. Alternating in a short duration of the play, the roles of the thieves, biological fathers of the adopted daughter of the house owners, or daughter's boyfriend and lover (in the case of the male visitor), Puig concentrates on the themes of incest, of the uncertain paternity, and that of passionate love in an almost simultaneous manner. Also along the lines of the soap opera, the knots of the plot are repeated in each scene: so that the spectator knows the story, which preceded the first. Each time the story is repeated, a small change is added, as in the novel of Aira. This gives the spectator the sensation of a narrative flux, which becomes more important than the plot itself, which in turn is pure artifice.

It is not a matter of chance that some of the authors who cite or recycle soap opera in their oeuvres define themselves as neo-baroque. It is the case of the Cuban Severo Sarduy and Cesar Aira who, in the novel cited earlier, also refer to the baroque character of the narrative and its characters. To this is added the permanence of the literary genres fallen in disgrace from the highbrow literature not only in soap operas, but also in other narrative genres of mass culture, such as the murder mysteries and western films, among others. Thus, we may say that the classic rhetoric read by theology, which supported the baroque writing, was substituted, in these authors, by the rhetoric of the mass culture. The spell soap opera casts over them lies because it is a product built with the conventions of this new rhetoric. Allied to the continuum of time and space the soap opera transforms itself into a hyper semiotic universe, where, as in the baroque mural paintings, there are no empty spaces. On the other hand, the serial character of the story, which Robert Allen considers the secret of the seduction of the soap opera with the public, allows access from any point (1996) . The attention to the flux allows the spectator to enter and leave the story during the course of the chapter, or even to leave the plot for days and months and to restart later. The aspect that is most interesting to feminist theory is the analysis of the soap operas afterwards, that is to say, the comments that occupy the daily life of women, are many times more important than the act of watching the soap opera. This, according to Allen, is determined by its serial format. Contrary to the book, where is possible to stop at a determined point, which allow the choice of a new entry into the story, the serial narrative induces, through daily imposed interruption, the desire to participate one time or another, in the lives of the characters. The after talks about the soap operas, which are a constant all over the world, represent a canalization of desire postponed all day.

Furthermore, to watch the soap opera today is an operation that is combined to the computer screen. I am referring to the channels that are formed in the Internet, keeping the spectator in direct communication with the TV station that airs the series. The Brazilian soap opera, for instance, has always

been a work in progress. Its only unchangeable parts were - and still are - the first ten to twenty chapters. The sequence is being written according to the answer given by the spectators, who is but a dilettante. The accelerated rhythm of the technological changes typical of the new vehicle of the 20th century - television - made that the soap opera spectator develop in a much faster pace than the reader of a novel. Nowadays, the soap opera spectator acts as a consumer demanding his or her rights. This reaction indicates that the audience maintains with the product a relationship that is less naïve than the first spectators. As maintained by Jesús Martín Barbero, the spectator is today a connoisseur able to recognize the narrative artifices of the soap opera (Martín-Barbero and Muñoz 1992) . Dominating the subjacent rhetoric to its construction, he feels capable of correcting it or to alter it, based on the rhetoric resources available.

This empathy between the public and the author is the second characteristic that puts the contemporary writer closer to his 18th century peers. This empathy is envied by all the highbrow narrators, as allegorized by the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa in his novel *Aunt Julia and the Scribbler* (1977). However, at the beginning of the novel, the distance between the writer and the scribbler was not so far. The reduced number of readers assured the circulation and acceptance of the codes created by the authors. The geographical distances that many times separated the cultural micro-circles of the Enlightenment times were lessened by the copious amount of correspondence. It is the case, for instance, of Bernardin Saint Pierre, author of *Paul and Virginia* ( 1787), recognized as a guide and counselor by his readers, whose letters he responded very attentively (Masseau, 1994, p. 14) . In addition, the oscillation in the form of the novel by authors such as Stern and Diderot shows that narration tried new formats and attempted to adapt to the new vehicle in expansion: the book.

The soap opera, especially the Brazilian soap opera, also tried to adapt itself to the new vehicle that arrived in the country in the 1950's: the television. Confirming the thinking of Cavell, its success was consolidated the moment it abandoned the melodramatic gesture and the themes that were far from daily life. From dialogues that were closer to the colloquial expression, to scenarios that reproduced the neighborhoods where people lived, the Brazilian soap opera became one of the most profitable products of the television industry. Its scale can be compared to that of the American film industry. According to Robert Allen, in Latin America, "with telenovelas occupying high-profile positions on prime-time television, telenovela actors frequently become national icons, and writers do not fear irreparable harm being done to their reputations by involvement in a telenovela project"(Allen, 1996, p. 117) .

Brazilian television was perhaps the first to confer to the scribbler of its melodramas, citing Vargas Llosa's term, the status of authorship. Immigrants from politically-informed theater by effect of the repression of the military dictatorship which forbid them from staging their plays, the first authors to gentrify the product, such as Walter Durst , Braulio Pedroso and Dias Gomes, with the authority that the dominance of both the highbrow codes and mass culture allowed them, introduced not only new themes, but also new techniques in serialized fiction for television (Santos, 2000) . Many of them were remnant of literature, such as the magical realism of the Latin American boom of the novel during the 1960s. This is the case, for instance, of some scenes of the soap opera *Saramandaia*, by Dias Gomes, during the 1970's. In this sense, the Brazilian soap opera can be considered one of the most successful sub-products of the national-populist aesthetics, which developed during the 1960's. His defense of his work as an intent to create a "Brazilian Television Drama", as expressed in his autobiography, indicates that Dias Gomes, one of the most prolific soap opera authors, was loyal to the national-populist ideas that were present in his theater work during the 1960's (Gomes, 1998) .

The poet Renata Pallotini, in her recently published manual called *Television Dramaturgy*, indicates that the objective of Dias Gomes was accomplished. She lists almost a dozen canonic theater and narrative authors who made their mark in the soap operas (Pallotini, 1998) . The maturity of the Brazilian television dramaturgy can be attested by the diversity of products described in the manual. According to Pallotini, the best one is the minisérie, with a quality of the visual image that reminds us of Walter Benjamin's thought concerning the techniques of reproduction, electronically bringing very high quality drama to a mass audience. Each new media demands a new education. As soon as new skills are achieved, new specialists, some of them really artists on the new field, arise.

The influence of the television in the literary narrative proves that the writers are not afraid of it. On the contrary, from visual media and soap operas a large group of Latin American writers reinvent in fiction the experimentation and the playfulness of the avant-garde. The utilization of the soap opera by the group of authors read here and by others that the space and time constraints does not allow me to go into detail, is inscribed in an anti-documental and anti-realist intent. The project is executed through the conscience what the modern perspective calls "subject-object", which allowed the contemplation of what was lived to be narrated afterwards, is no longer possible. The narrators of this literary branch understand the successive as the speed of images and sounds that fragmentally alternate in the various screens that surround us. In the novels presented here there is neither subject nor object of the narrative. Narrative and author are mixed in, just as the radio and memory. Because of this, the radio and the soap opera achieve the status of an unique experience, marked at the same time by the repetition and by the distinction. Aira thus summarizes the narrative unpredictability that results: "The truly unexplainable does not have a sanctuary other than the massive media of communications"(Aira, 1996, p. 73) . After describing listening to a singer out of tune as one of his earliest and weirdest memories of the radio, the narrator desperately looks for this lost character: "maybe she is still alive and remembers... and if she is reading my book... My number is in the telephone directory. I always have my answering machine on, and I always am near the phone." Thus, the complicated competition between writers and scriptwriters for readers, listeners or spectators continues... But these are scenes from the next episode.

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