

Novelas, Novelinhas, Novelões: The Evolution of the (Tele)Novela in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of the novela in both radio and television forms, and shows how the Brazilian telenovela, while remaining faithful to the traditions of the genre, has modernized itself, in both thematic and aesthetic terms. Part of the success of this strategy rests on the concerned intention of novela writers and producers to create a new form of dramatic expression aimed at a wide audience both at home and abroad. Although not confining its discussions to the Globo novelas, this paper also shows that the Brazilian novela stand for Globo novela, which is widely seen around the world.

Every evening, from Monday to Saturday, millions of Brazilians tune in their television sets to watch novelas[i] — the centerpiece of Globo network's prime time hours, and reputedly the most popular television programs in Brazil. But while novelas have enjoyed massive popularity since the 1960s, the novela is not a genre specific to Brazilian television or, as is sometimes thought, "a Globo and even a Brazilian invention" (Dalevi, 2000, p. 3). Without the pretense of exhausting the topic in this brief essay, I would like to look at the evolution of the novela in Brazil, where it first appeared in the medium of television in 1951. Titled *Sua vida me pertence* (Your Life Belongs to Me), it caused great commotion among contemporary viewers by featuring the first kiss on Brazilian television (Borelli, 2000, p.139). This first novela and many more that followed were influenced by the (radio)novela (serialized radio melodrama), which was hugely popular in Brazil during the 1940s (Federico, 1982; Belli, 1980).

Despite the fact that novelas were produced by Brazilian television throughout the 1950s one may occasionally read that "the history of the telenovela began in 1963" with 2-5499 *Ocupado* (Line 2-5499 Is Busy), the first novela broadcast daily by TV Excelsior (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 14). Such an account is based on the fact that the novela, as originally conceived, has little to do with the modern serialized television dramas which have become part of the collective fantasy life of the Brazilian masses since 1963, when the videotape recorder began to be regularly used in the country by the existing networks—namely, TV Tupi, TV Excelsior, TV Rio, TV Record, and TV Paulista. No doubt, more rapidly and pervasively than any other television genre, the novela has "dramatically" changed and evolved since the first images of *Sua vida me pertence* were aired by TV Tupi on December 21, 1951. The rise of TV Globo in the 1970s, along with significant technological advances in the medium itself, considerably contributed to the development of the novela as an art form with unique Brazilian characteristics. Today Brazilian television is best known for its (bigger and better) novelas—avowedly the most politically and aesthetically sophisticated programs produced in Latin America (Nogueira, 2002; Daniel Filho, 2001; Costa, 2000; Hamburger, 2000, 1998; Porto, 1998; Mazziotti, 1996). Although not concerned specifically with the Globo novelas, this essay will provide an opportunity to recount their history by way of looking at how the serialized novela migrated from radio to television in the 1950s, having thereafter become the pillar of the industry. For this purpose, this essay will look back at the first novelas, both in their radio and television forms, and later discuss the several variations of the genre within television itself.

The novela as an evolving genre

An understanding of the novela must begin with the recognition that it is the result of a process of evolution. Its roots date back to the 18th-century English novel and the 19th-century French feuilleton (serialized fiction)—a literary genre highly regarded by contemporary newspaper readers. The feuilleton (Port: folhetim) crossed the Atlantic (in translation) circa 1836, finding an avid readership in Brazil and other Latin American countries. The enthusiasm for the genre is amply demonstrated by the fact that by 1838 works by prestigious writers like José de Alencar began to appear in this form in major Brazilian

newspapers of the period (Ortiz et al., 1988, p. 17).

The influence of the feuilleton on the dramatics and popularity of the novela has been stressed by Meyer (1996) and others. For one, Martín-Barbero (1995) argues that the semi-open structure of the feuilleton—“carried out according to plan, but open to the influence of its readers’ reactions”—not only “propitiated the (con)fusion of fiction and life,” but “continues to constitute one of the key elements in today’s soap operas both in its configuration as a genre and in its widespread success” (p. 277). The availability of the feuilleton in electronic form (the soap opera) was the most significant development in the genre during the 20th century.

Created by the soap and detergent industry, the soap opera first appeared in the U.S. as a radio program around 1930. Before disappearing in its radio form around 1960, the soap opera had already been consigned to daytime television broadcasting, appearing 5 days a week, 52 weeks a year in all three main U.S. networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC (Mattelart & Mattelart, p. 10). While the complexities and nuances of them reveal differences, it is nevertheless possible to say that the soap opera met many, if not most, of the configurations of the serialized newspaper fiction (Martín-Barbero, 1995). One major difference, perhaps, was that, aimed at daytime audiences composed primarily of housewives, the soap opera was considered (by critics) a frivolous form of entertainment and despised for years as a “women’s genre” (Geraghty, 1991).

At a certain point, the same “soap” companies (Colgate-Palmolive, Proctor and Gamble, and Gessy Lever) that were instrumental in producing the U.S. soap operas introduced the genre to Latin America. With the largest number of radio sets, Cuba ultimately proved itself the most fertile market for the (radio)novela, becoming thereafter the main producer and exporter of the genre to the rest of the continent. In the hands of Cubans, and later Mexicans and Argentineans, the Latin American novelas became more melodramatic than their U.S. counterparts. When they arrived in Brazil in 1941, they already had all the classic elements of the melodrama (romance, intrigue, betrayal, etc.) that would immediately endear radio listeners to them.

A decade later, with the advent of television, the novela gained its modern visual form. The same corporate advertisers that underwrote the (radio)novelas were critical in pushing for the development of the (tele)novela—a relatively cheap daytime program geared toward the same kind of female audience that their radio counterparts had until then. With few exceptions, novelas were still written outside Brazil during the 1950s. Over the years, as Brazilian playwrights began to also write novelas, television viewers no longer awaited for the next adapted import. By the mid-1960s, they relied increasingly on novelas “made-in-Brazil”, even if these remained thematically alien, even irrelevant, to what was happening in Brazilian society. This began to change in the latter part of decade with Beto Rockfeller (Tupi, 1968-1969), a landmark in Brazilian television drama, for it represented the first serious attempt to create an “original” Brazilian novela, in both thematic and aesthetic terms.

The increase in the number of Brazilian novelas from the early 1970s on brought a renewed concern on the part of novela writers and producers to create a national interpretation of the genre. Brazilian novelas began to comment on contemporary social and political issues, and distinguished themselves from their Latin American and U.S. counterparts “by a higher degree of artistry in which the skilful audio-visual composition [displayed] the fine settings, the exterior scenery and well-designed costumes” (Trinta, 1997, p. 276). By the early 1980s, the genre had become Brazilian(ized), however ambiguous this term can be, showing itself capable of changing and adapting itself in myriad styles in order to find new viewers and new markets, even in seemingly improbable countries such as China, Bosnia, Indonesia, Poland, Russia, and Chad. In what follows, I discuss the evolution of the Brazilian novela as it took place along the past decades.

In the Beginning

The history of the Brazilian (tele)novela is as old as the history of the Brazilian television itself. Television was introduced in Brazil in 1950 in the midst of an extensive policy of modernization fomented during the so-called Vargas-Kubitscheck era (1940s-1950s). The modern architecture of Brasília

symbolizes the euphoric mentality of these years, when it was felt that the country was on the verge of becoming modern. Television was thought to participate in this process doubly:

On the one hand, developing the electronics industry and increasing consumption of television sets; on the other hand, collaborating to modify the standards of behavior of Brazilians, upon diffusing an urban lifestyle throughout society and, consequently, diffusing the necessities of consumption inherent to it. (Montero, 1985, p. 2)

Thus, when Paulista impresario Francisco de Assis Chateaubriand inaugurated the first television station, TV Tupi-São Paulo, in September of that year, television became—if only in the eyes of the cultural and economic elites—the paragon of Brazilian modernity. This notwithstanding, the diffusion of television was slow, concentrated mainly in the São Paulo-Rio de Janeiro axis (TV Tupi-Rio was inaugurated in January 1951). This was so, in part, because Brazil still lacked industries to manufacture the component parts of television sets, and the few available (imported from the U.S.) were sold at prohibitively high prices for the majority of Brazilians (Sodré, 1984, p. 95). The U.S. commercial television provided the basic model for the network, and North American influence seemed evident in the production and style of programs in this period. Radio, in its turn, provided the network with its most successful programs (the daily evening news *Repórter Esso* and the weekly quiz show *O céu é o limite*) and its first professionals, notably Oduvaldo Vianna (father), Fernanda Montenegro, Lima Duarte, Cassiano Gabus Mendes, Ivani Ribeiro, and the so-called “queen of (tele)novelas” herself, Janete Clair (Daniel Filho, 2001; Lorêdo, 2000; Klagsbrunn & Resende, 1991).

Using radio and theater stars, imported know-how, and obsolete equipment, Brazilian television was from its inception an urban and elitist medium. Unlike radio, which had by then great penetration in the country basically producing programs geared toward the lower- and lower-middle classes, television was most effective in reaching the upper-classes with live musical and quiz shows as well as evening news and teledramas (“highbrow” dramas), which were theatrical performances of world-famous dramatic novels and plays with little, if any, modifications to fit the requirements of the medium (Lorêdo, pp. 59-62). A year later, television also began experimenting with a lesser kind of drama: the novela. Modeling itself after radio, television imported scripts and even complete novelas from Argentina, Mexico, and Cuba. Viewers were not entirely wrong to call Brazilian television a “radio with pictures” in these days (Klagsbrunn & Resende, p. 13).

By the time *A sua vida me pertence* appeared on television, radio was already dedicating ample space and investment towards the production of the novela, a genre it helped to popularize to an unexpected degree. As the story goes, the public listened to novelas as if they were for “real.” So much so that a radio actor, Amaral Gurgel, who played the role of a doctor in *Em busca da felicidade*, was daily followed by fans seeking his medical advice (Federico, p. 63). Not surprisingly, perhaps, “This is the same kind of identification which now underlies the passion inspired” by today’s novelas (Martín-Barbero, p. 278).

Regarded as a bricolage of sorts, the genre commanded then great loyalty from female listeners (Ortiz et al., pp. 26-27). Whether it be for this reason or not, the key ingredient in any novela was, after the melodrama, the commercial merchandising (the placement of real consumer products in the fiction):

The merchandising technique appeared with the first novela. Colgate would send photos of the actors and one photo album with the summary of *Em busca da felicidade* to the listener who had sent one label of “Colgate.” The result exceeded expectations and the promotion was stopped because in its first month no less than 48,000 “Colgate” labels had arrived in the radio station.

[Moreover], in advertising soaps, household products, etc., the need of the daily “beauty” shower, of the “macho” shaving, and of the care with teeth polished with the same toothpaste of the “stars” were evidenced. Everything motivated personal beauty and hygiene, reinforced with the presentation of other products, such as, starch to better press the clothes.... Household cleaning products, such as, floor cleaners and disinfectant products also began sensitizing the public to its use through advertising. (Federico, p. 79)

This isn't really surprising, considering that these programs were then owned and produced by multinational advertisement agencies interested in marketing their products in the most cost-effective manner possible. All one has to do is look at the title of the programs (Teatro Good-Year, Recital Johnson, Programa Bayer and Rádio Melodia Ponds) to realize that they invariably served as advertisements themselves. As to the (radio)novela, its popularity began to fade in the 1950s after the genre had already been successfully adapted to television. In these years, the mixing of "dramas," from theater and radio, into television resulted in confusing program titles (at least to today's researcher)—Teatro do Lar Feliz (novelas) and Teatro de Comédias (plays)—before advertising agencies added to the list Teatro Wallita (plays) and Teatro de Novelas Coty (novelas). At this point in time the word novela simply meant a shorter story (generally adapted from a literary work) than that of a lengthier classic play. In any case, this type of program became the sources of inspiration for the first mini novelas, or novelinhas in the day's jargon, produced by Brazilian television. As they were, the novelinhas were telecast live twice a week, in a total of 20 episodes of about 15 to 20 minutes each (Fogolari, 2002, p. 112). Aimed at engaging the audience's attention from day to day, these episodes were left open (through deliberate use of cliffhangers), replicating thus the story-structure of the serialized novels, both in its newspaper and radio forms, that Brazilians had passionately consumed for many years.

In contrast to TV dramas, which featured the works of classic dramatists like Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Molière among others, the novelinhas were not of high literary aspirations, however. On the contrary, as critics (Daniel Filho, 2001; Klagsbrunn & Resende, 1991; Vink, 1988) point out, they were over-dramatic and under-rehearsed adaptations of scripts originally written for radio; nothing fancy if compared to today's novelas, and certainly not popular with the majority of television viewers.

It must be recalled here that between 1951, when the first novelinha was shown on television, and 1963, when the first images of the daily novela were aired by TV Excelsior, television still drew a miniscule public from the middle- and upper- classes. This was to change in 1964 when television sets, no longer imported from the U.S., became affordable to the lower- classes living in the peripheries of Brazil's largest cities. In 1965, there were three million television sets in use in Brazil; a three-fold increase from the previous year (Mattos, 2000, p. 2). By then, the videotape had already begun changing the ways Brazilians produced, performed, and consumed daily novelas (Távola, 1996). Coinciding with these changes, *A Moça que Veio de Longe* (The Girl Who Came from Afar), adapted and directed by Ivani Ribeiro (Excelsior, 1964), met with an enormous success. So did *O direito de nascer*, originally a (radio)novela written in 1946 by a Cuban, Felix B. Cagnet, and transmitted by Radio Nacional a few years later (1950-1951). In its television version, TV Tupi (1964-1965) broadcast it, with its end celebrated in two mass meetings attended by thousands of fans. Historian and critic Ismael Fernandes (1987) registered these events:

At its completion, on August 13, 1965, there was a celebration in São Paulo's Ibirapuera and, the following day, there was another one in Rio de Janeiro's Maracanãzinho. The full stadium reflected the power of the novelas on the masses who, in a kind of collective trance, wept and chanted the names of the novela's characters. The actress Guy Loup fainted in view of such commotion. In reality, no other Brazilian actor [sic], in any time ever, had the honor of so much ovation. (pp. 50-51)

With *O direito de nascer* the novela became a national institution and a powerful tool in the competition between the networks, including TV Bandeirantes and the newly inaugurated TV Globo.

A new novela era had started; an era initially marked by the rise of the star actor as personified by Tarcísio Meira, Carlos Zara, Hélio Souto, and Sérgio Cardoso among others, and, ultimately, by the primacy of the censor as a result of the military coup d'état in 1964. Lengthy novelas, or novelões, such as *Redenção* (Excelsior, 1966-1968), which consisted of 596 episodes, began their careers in this period. Such a "novel(ty)" much pleased the viewers and especially the multinational companies selling detergent and dental products in the country. As noted by Vink, the novela began to provide television with a faithful audience precisely at the moment when advertising was becoming an important source of revenue to the networks. In fact, "that was the main reason the length of the novelas started to increase from the original couple of weeks to nine to ten months" and beyond (p. 25). Shown in the early evening hours (between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m.), novela episodes were also expanded, eventually reaching between 50 and 55

minutes.

As to *Redenção*, it obtained a huge following by featuring the story of a mysterious doctor who, upon arriving in a small rural town, performed a heart transplant—"the first well succeeded in Brazil" (Priolli, 1985, p. 27). Not every network, however, favored a rural, even a national set for its novelas. For one, Globo network set its novelas in Mexico, Japan, Morocco, Russia, and Spain as per the "melodramatic imagination" of Cuban-exiled Maria Magdalena Iturrioz y Placencia, a.k.a Gloria Magadan, popularly known as "the sorcerer." Made to formula, Magadan's novelas were, in popular vocabulary, *dramalhões* (melodramatic in "excess"), achieved by implausible stories with plenty of melodramatic clichés (dramatic cape and sword romances, mystery, tragedy, etc.), and yet capable of capturing the audience's attention with moments of complete conviction (Fernandes, p. 37-38).

These "excesses" apart, the novelas included some of Brazil's most respected radio actors and stage directors, with television amassing popular success on a scale that the film industry could only regard with envy (Lopez, 1991). This goes without saying, nonetheless, that Magadan's style had its detractors, especially among the more intellectual novela writers like Walter George Durst, Walter Negrão, Benedito Ruy Barbosa, Mário Lago, Geraldo Vietri, Lauro César Muniz, Mário Prata and others who favored Brazilian themes and, to a certain degree, less melodramatic story lines for their novelas. One might even go so far as to say, as Fernandes has, that, by gesturing toward realism, novelas like *Ninguém Crê em Mim* (Nobody Believes Me) by Muniz (Excelsior, 1966), and *Antonio Maria* by Vietri (Tupi, 1968-1969), set a new dramatic style of representation that paved the way for the modern Brazilian novela (pp. 85, 109). Even today Magadan's supposedly lack of originality continues to be the object of critical attack, as are, still more, Janete Clair's first novelas, written in the same overly melodramatic, formulaic style (Costa, 2000).

Late 1960s-Early 1970s: Time of Transition

Written by Bráulio Pedroso and directed by Lima Duarte (also an actor), *Beto Rockfeller* became a turning point in novela production in the late 1960s. Without completely breaking with the melodramatics of the genre, it introduced a modern "dramatic spirit" into Brazilian television: it used colloquial language instead of the traditional theatrical speech prevalent in previous novelas, relied on film techniques for its shootings and employed an irreverent style of acting, all the while featuring a parade of characters from different social classes, including a typical Brazilian *malandro* (rogue) as personified by "Beto", a São Paulo shoe salesman who used "all his wits to climb the social scale" (Mattelart & Mattelart, p. 15). In the meantime, *Beto Rockfeller* itself "elevated" the genre to the category of *novela-verdade* (novela vérité), being the first of the kind to confer the writer (an inflated expression by today's standard since his/her job consisted until then of adapting the script and directing the actors) the status of author—to date the least theorized "category" in studies of novela production in Brazil (Vink 1998; Nogueira 2002).

With the smashing audience success of *Beto Rockfeller*, TV Tupi showed that it was possible to make a funny and wit novela based on Brazilian contemporary reality without failing the IBOPE (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion).[ii] The formula put in effect by Pedroso, and soon repeated by Vietri and Negrão in *Nino, o Italianinho* (Tupi, 1969-1970), demonstrated, above all, that the era of the *dramalhões* was over. Proof of this came when, after running *Simplesmente Maria* (1970-1971) for a few weeks, TV Tupi realized that it had failed to replicate its past two successes: *Simplesmente Maria*, which had been a megahit in other Latin American countries, was "simply" not well received by Brazilian viewers (Fernandes, p. 141). But by the time TV Tupi realized its error, TV Globo—which, after firing Magadan, had started wholeheartedly the process of "Brazilianization" of its novelas—had already stolen its audience. This was done with the help of Janete Clair, whose *Véu de Noiva* (Bridal Veil, 1969-1970) was advertised as the first *novela-verdade* of the network (Fernandes, pp. 135-136).

With *Irmãos Coragem* (Brothers Courage, 1970-1971), a novela which, also written by Clair, celebrated soccer and glamorized male virility, TV Globo began to attract the men to novela watching. In terms of formal innovations, Clair's new style was a long way from the overly melodramatic, theatrical one of her first novelas and much close to the more realistic style of the serialized television dramas produced today. Other innovations, of technical order (better lighting, videotapes, smaller microphones, portable cameras,

etc.), made it further possible for TV Globo to (re)invent its own styles of novela all the while nudging aside the multinational advertising agencies that had until then controlled the production of novelas in Brazil.

The rise of Roberto Marinho's Globo network has been described in some detail elsewhere (Rêgo, in print). Suffice it to mention here that Globo's professionalism and production capabilities made it stand apart from the other Brazilian networks. (Following a period of complete creative and financial disarray, TVTupi—TV Globo's main rival—collapsed in 1980.) Of course, not every Globo novela succeeded in appealing to television viewers, but the variety and quality of TV Globo's output in the 1970s meant new developments in the evolution of the novela in Brazil, as we shall see.

Since then the novela has assumed a tremendous level of importance and widened its appeal: the glossy prime time Globo novelas having even become worldwide phenomena. In the more intellectual sphere of academia, novelas were not taken seriously until the late 1970s-early 1980s, a trend that continues today (LaPastina 2002, 2001; Nogueira, 2002; Lopes, 2002; Pereira Jr., 2002; Resende, 2001; Araújo, 2000; Pallottini, 1998; Trinta, 1997; Távola, 1996; Melo, 1988; Ortiz et al., 1988; Leal, 1986; Ramos, 1986; Campedelli, 1985; Carvalho et al., 1970-1980, to mention only a few). And yet, when compared to other novelas, the Globo novelas have received a wider share of research and publicity and this is not without reasons since TV Globo converted the genre into a sophisticated Brazilian commodity for internal consumption and export, ultimately setting the model for other Brazilian networks.

Written by Brazil's leading dramatists and performed by big television stars (most of whom migrated from TV Tupi and TV Excelsior), the Globo novelas began to be broadcast in the 1970s at 6, 7, 8 and 10 in the evening, each with its own style and thematic emphasis, and directed to different segments of the audience. As Fernandes has noted, "enough to say '7 o'clock novela' and everybody knows that it refers to a Globo novela, shown at 7 p.m., with fixed characteristics" (p.131), in which case

The novela at 6 is more for a domestic audience, women and children. At 7, the audience includes people who have just come home from work so the novela is more radio-like than visual; lighter so that people can attend to their affairs. At 8, it's drama, the dramatic novela. (Doc Comparato in Mattelart & Mattelart, p. 39)

But, as in the best novelas, things ultimately change and the rest of this essay will look at the changes in novela styles, and the savvy moves by other networks to beat TV Globo in the competition for audiences.

Late 1970s-Early 1980s: Time of Changes

Between 1975-1982, TV Globo dedicated the 6 p.m. slot to lavish and costly novelas de época (epic novelas), which were either based on or "inspired" by Brazilian literary classics. One of the more successful was *Escrava Isaura* (Slave Isaura, 1977), adapted by Gilberto Braga from a 19th-century anti-slavery novel by Bernardo Guimarães. The success of this novela was exceptional, especially considering that Braga did not hesitate to borrow ideas from earlier dramalhões "à la Magadan." The 6 o'clock novelas inspired TV Globo's miniseries, first produced by the network in 1979 for the 10 p.m. slot. Beginning in 1983, the novelas de época began to disappear. They became then more adventurous and outgoing in their settings and their stories to include "landowners, ranchers, farmers, mayors, priests, physicians, local businesspeople, and at least a romantic teenaged couple" and, above all, to better accommodate the practice of merchandising (Kottak, 1990, p. 40). Although aimed at urbanites, the 6 o'clock novelas (actually aired at 6:10 p.m.) have increasingly become popular in rural areas.

In turn, the network has always dedicated the 7 p.m. slot for the so-called novelas leves (novela lights)—a mixture of light comedy, romance, and glamour mainly geared for the teen audience. Whether or not explicit in their titles, the 7 o'clock novelas (actually aired at 7: 15 p.m.) are irreverent, tending to comment on current issues (*Guerra dos Sexos*, 1983-1984; *Vila Madalena*, 1999/00), trends (*Transas e Caretas*, 1984; *Vamp*, 1991-1992) and fads (*Ti-Ti-Ti*, 1985-1986; *Top Model*, 1989-1990; *Corpo Dourado*, 1998).

Since the early 1970s, the dramatic novelas have been reserved for the 8 p.m. slot. As Kottak has

observed, the 8 o'clock novela (actually aired at 8:55 p.m.) "is a mystery, usually with a few murders. Several times during [that] decade [and well into the 1980s], the entire nation ... watched as a murderer is revealed in the last episode" (p. 40). Two such novelas were *O Astro* (The Star; 1977-1978) by Clair, and *Vale Tudo* (Anything Goes; 1988-1989) by Braga; the latter been recently re-made in Spanish for the U.S.-Latino market (Antunes, 2002).

But not all 8 o'clock novelas are made equal, and there is no reason to believe that they all fit the mystery style, or that they are all (melo)dramatic. It is, in fact, not too difficult to find examples of other styles, including farce and satire, sometimes within a single novela, sometimes within the oeuvre of a single author. One of those was Clair herself, whose traditional, melodramatic style (Rosa Rebelde, 1969) evolved into a more realistic one in later years (*Pecado Capital*, 1975-1976), not without her first experimenting with the so-called "Western" or "Bang-Bang" style (the first of which was *Irmãos Coragem*)—a style which was to be followed by Benedito Ruy Barbosa, first in *Pantanal* (Manchete, 1990) and later in *Renascença* (Globo, 1993) and *Rei do Gado* (Globo, 1996-1997). Without faithfully following this style, novelas like *Escalada* (1975) by Muniz and *Roque Santeiro* (1985-1986) by Gomes have, nonetheless, also reproduced the myth of machohood, typical of western films (Borelli, pp. 136-137). Moreover, one still may find novelas eróticas (erotic novelas), or pseudo erotic, like *Mandala* (1987-1988) by Gomes, *Tieta* (1989-1990) and *A Indomada* (1997) by Aguinaldo Silva, even *Torre de Babel* (1998-1999) by Silvio de Abreu—a style inaugurated by *Gabriela* (1975), an adaptation by Durst of Jorge Amado's novel *Gabriela, Cravo e Canela* (*Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*), actually a 10 o'clock novela.[iii]

Aimed at a more intellectually sophisticated audience than earlier slots, the 10 p.m. slot was inaugurated in 1969, suspended in 1979, and reintroduced again in 1983, time in which TV Globo started alternating imported *seriados* (TV series) and its own miniseries in late prime time viewing hours. Originally created for Dias Gomes, the slot would soon accommodate other renowned Brazilian dramatists, responsible for further experimenting with the novela format (Pallottini, 1998).[iv]

It might be useful to point out here that at the time Brazilian theater was going through difficult moments due to the military dictatorship. The pressure and, ultimately, the "scissors" of the censors made several directors, actors and playwrights like Jorge Andrade, Mário Prata, Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Plínio Marcos and others abandon the stage and seek exile in television, a medium which offered them better salaries and, however illusive, greater creative freedom at that time. More effective than any sermon, the 10 o'clock novela became in these years a powerful political tool with which to express criticism of social reality. While not overtly political in the militant sense, novelas such as *O Bofe* (1972-1973) by Pedroso and Muniz, *O Bem Amado* (Well-Beloved; 1973) and *Saramandaia* (1976) by Gomes, as well as *Os Ossos do Barão* (1973-1974) by Andrade and *O Rebu* (1974-1975) by Pedroso, made use of fantastic realism to depict life, politics, corruption, and hypocrisy in contemporary Brazilian society in the hopes of awakening the critical senses of the audience (Borelli, p. 130). Ironically they did so in ways that, while the censors did not "get it," the most cultivated audience did.[v]

On the other hand, not all of these "fantastic" experiments were appreciated by the general audience who began to migrate to other networks, and for the first time TV Globo's monopoly on novelas was challenged by less "noble" rivals like the *Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão* (SBT) and *TV Manchete*, both set up with the remains of the Tupi network. Whereas SBT, for economic reasons, preferred to import cheap(er) Mexican novelas, *TV Manchete* began its own novela production center, buying actors and directors from TV Globo and investing huge sums of money in super productions of short(er) duration, often around 80 episodes (the typical novela has 150 to 180 episodes). Thus, whereas *TV Manchete's* high quality novelas, patterned themselves after the so-called "Globo Pattern of Quality," attracted largely the wealthy, educated audience, SBT's "Mexican-ized" tendencies became synonymous with kitsch and bad taste to be enjoyed by the poor and uneducated (Costa, p. 80). In the end, however, neither SBT nor *TV Manchete* broke TV Globo's monopoly on novelas, and by the end of the 1980s SBT began proudly calling itself "the absolute leader of the second place" (in Vink, p. 31).[vi] By then, TV Globo had already become an exporter of television programs, especially novelas and miniseries. *O Bem Amado*, the first of its novelas to be sold abroad, also happened to be its first novela in color.

In the end

Ever since the first novela appeared in 1951, hundreds more have been produced by Brazilian television, especially by TV Globo. For a number of years now the network has a monopoly on novelas, although more recently the SBT has started to invest in the production of its own novelas, attempting to use them in the competition with TV Globo's prime time programs. While originally modeled on the U.S. soap opera, the novela stands as a truly Brazilian(ized) television genre today. It would be indeed simplistic, if not misleading, to call Brazilian novelas "soap operas"—a term that carries a different meaning in the U.S. (Allen, 1995). In addition, as Aluizio Trinta correctly remarks, "on the whole, Brazilian telenovelas have gone a step beyond the traditional paths followed by American soap opera. [They have] made remarkable progress in both thematic and aesthetic terms, developing into a new form of dramatic expression" (p. 276). Today, Brazilians believe themselves to be the masters of novelas (Daniel Filho, 2001)—a genre that is much more popular (and seemingly much more important) in Brazil than in the U.S., due mainly to structural differences in the industry itself. This is reflected in the fact that, except for *Vale A Pena Ver de Novo* (a program of shorter reruns of Globo's most popular novelas of the past), which is televised daily at 2:10 p.m., Brazilian novelas are broadcast six rather than five times per week over an eight-month period during prime time viewing hours (between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m.). More important, perhaps, Brazilian novelas have a closure, whereas U.S. soaps continue for years (or until they are canceled). The final episode of any novela is broadcast Friday and rebroadcast Saturday, with a new one moving into its slot the following Monday. It has been a common practice for a new novela to go on the air with 15 or so episodes written, and for the rest to be written in accordance with the audience's reaction, in which case the development of the plot can be modified, and the role of characters either lengthened or shortened depending on their popularity (Jambeiro, 2001, pp. 116-117).

Considering all networks, there are, on average, two novelas beginning each month. Each novela episode starts with a replay of the previous night's last scenes, followed by an opening sequence of the day's episode. Next comes the theme song, which serves as background music for detailed cast credits. (In 1969, Globo created the label *Som Livre* to market the theme songs of its novelas.) Appearing every 12 minutes, advertising breaks are preceded by *ganchos* (cliffhangers), which keep the audience in suspense until the next scenes within an episode, or the next day (Pallottini, pp. 120-124).

Moreover, today's Brazilian novelas are not limited to any particular style: they may be dramatic, comic, sentimental, or a variation of the three. They have made their authors national celebrities, launched the careers of new actors, directors and musicians, and assumed a tremendous level of importance in Brazilian society, even more so than soccer, one of the greatest Brazilian passions. Networks work strenuously to "discover" new professionals, and TV Globo maintained the *Casa de Criação Janete Clair* (an in-house creation center named after Janete Clair) for a short period (1984-1986), in order to provide supervised training to new authors. Given, however, the high costs of production, it became safer for the network to continue to rely on its seasoned writers. In 1995, the network inaugurated the *Central Globo de Produções*, an in-house production center known in Brazil as *PROJAC*, a state-of-the-art television production facility that rivals a Hollywood studio (Jambeiro, p. 97).

With ratings that outstrip any other of television programs and the highest rates of advertisers, prime time Globo novelas are entitled to the biggest production budgets, with the cost of making a single episode sometimes exceeding \$ 100,000 (Jambeiro, p. 119). In order to defray costs, the network makes use of commercial merchandising, which serves a validating function to new consumer products introduced into the market. Commercial merchandising has become so important indeed that Globo has its own company (*Central Globo de Comunicação*) to exclusively deal with it:

The best use of [merchandising] is to create new habits and establish new products. Kellogg... was wasting its time trying to convince Brazilians to eat Corn Flakes for breakfast with traditional advertising. Brazilians aren't used to eating breakfast.... It's a public service we're performing [sic], teaching them to eat well in the morning. We teach hygiene, too, like when novela characters go and brush their teeth. (In Wentz, 1984, p. 25)

Unless one has seen Brazilian novelas, it is hard to imagine how strong an impact they have on public

opinion, taste, and social mannerisms. Their appeal stem in part from the fact that, since censorship began to fade in the mid-1980s, they have become even so more “realist” by touching on controversial political and social themes such agrarian reform, racism, abortion, drug abuse, environmental degradation, homosexuality, corruption, and cloning, mixed in, of course, with themes of passionate romance, intrigue and betrayal, with justice and love always triumphing in the end like in any classic (melo)drama.[vii] Whichever way, this has created the opportunity for viewers to debate and reflect on many relevant contemporary issues which, inserted deliberately in the plot of the novelas, have well-defined educational purposes. Such a practice, implemented systematically by TV Globo some 12 years ago, is known as social merchandising. *Laços de Família* (Family Ties; 2000-2001) was a case in point. It featured the story of a girl, Camila, who had been diagnosed with leukemia, a type of cancer that affects millions of Brazilians every year. The character’s desperate search for a compatible donor for a medulla transplant seemingly encouraged thousands of Brazilians to donate medulla throughout the country. Soon thereafter, Brazilian newspapers and magazines started calling the phenomenon the “Camila Effect,” a movement that indisputably raised social awareness to the problems of blood and organs donation in the country, and apparently helping hospitals to perform thousands of life saving transplants ever since. More recently (June 2002), Glória Perez, author of *O Clone* (The Clone; 2001-2002) received from former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso an award for promoting social awareness of drug abuse and pregnancy among teens, and for educating Brazilians about the Muslim culture (Organizações Globo, 2001; Population Media Center, 2003).

But like the characters they portray, Brazilian novelas—synonymous today with Globo novelas—have also had their own ups and downs. Daniel Filho (2001), director of Central Globo de Criação, an in-house creation center, has just recently confirmed that despite the international success of the Globo novelas, TV Globo is losing its hold in the Latin American and U.S.-Latino markets due to increasing competition from Mexican and Venezuela novelas (pp. 341-348). Had this not been enough, Sílvia Borelli and Gabriel Priolli (2000) have also given an indication that, despite its undisputed supremacy in the field, TV Globo is losing its edge at home. Titling their book *A Deusa Vencida* (The Loser Goddess) after a novela by Ivani Ribeiro (*Excelsior*, 1965; *Bandeirantes*, 1980), they have interpreted the decline of audience ratings in the past decade (from 70-100% in the 1970s and 1980s to 30-45% since the early 1990s) as a crisis in the genre (pp. 33-41).

Perhaps statements like that “the network’s repeated use of well-worn plot lines and characters in the novelas ran the risk of boring audiences” (Page, 1995, p. 464; see also Borelli & Priolli, pp. 33-41; Daniel Filho, p. 71; Mattelart & Mattelart, pp. 56-58) is no longer a forecast into an unforeseen future, but a very real episode in today’s TV Globo. Think only of *Esperança* (2002-2003), the latest novela by Benedito Ruy Barbosa, also responsible for one of TV Globo’s most successful novelas in the 1990s: *Terra Nostra* (1999). Both novelas were top-notch productions featuring the tales of Italian immigrants to Brazil but, contrary to *Terra Nostra*, which daily commanded a crowd of about 47 million Brazilians (in reality, a much smaller crowd than that of his earlier novelas), *Esperança* failed to maintain a satisfactory IBOPE rating (above 40%) as expected. Barbosa, known as “the king of the 8 p.m. slot” ultimately “quitted” the novela, whose story line was revamped by Walcyr Carrasco. However much disappointment it might have been to Barbosa, *Esperança* has ultimately proved that there is no sure-fire formula for success.

In any case, Globo has learned to live with the so-called “tyranny of the IBOPE,” even successfully counter-attack it, by continuously polling the audience (sometimes by means of organized group discussions) and giving *noveleiros* (novela enthusiasts) new plot lines for daily gossip and entertainment. But even if the so-called “golden age” of novelas has passed as the work of Borelli and Priolli indicates, TV Globo is not about to renounce its big-budget, high-quality productions that can be seen all over the world (Daniel Filho, p. 352). It just might want to watch out as novela authors like Manuel Carlos have been increasingly lured by foreign networks interested in fine tuning the genre to the tastes of their own audiences and in eventually distributing their own novelas in the international market (Melo, 1995, p. 8).

Endnotes

[i] Since the term telenovela is rarely, if ever, used outside academia, I have opted to use in this paper “novelas, novelinhas, novelões” as they refer to both “novel” formats of radio and television, and are

known as such in daily usage by the public. In order to overcome the ambiguity this may cause at times, I will use these terms interchangeably with radionovela and telenovela throughout the text. I wish to thank the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Kansas for their support in the preparation of this paper through the Big XII Fellowship Program.

[ii] Comparable to Nielsen in the U.S., IBOPE has performed audience measurement research since 1954. If a novela fails to obtain a good IBOPE rating (above 40%) after a certain number of episodes it can be either terminated or modified, whereas a novela that maintains a high rating (70% and above) may see its life span increased, as it was the case of Beto Rockefeller (Fernandes, p. 117). See: <http://www.ibope.com>

[iii] Three novelas eróticas stand out: Dona Beija (1986), Pantanal (cited in text), and Xica da Silva (1996), all made by TV Manchete. TV Globo has in turn taken the style into its late-night miniseries, leaving the 8 p.m. slot open to what I call the “epic style” as incarnated by Terra Nostra (1999-2000) and Esperança (2002-2003), both in the same vein of Os Imigrantes (Bandeirantes, 1981-1982), all authored by Benedito Ruy Barbosa.

[iv] Although the modern novela has got much closer to the comedy of manners (political satires of Brazilian society) than to the melodrama proper (a point well made by Klagsbrunn & Resende, 1991, pp.23-24), comedy is not a word which readily springs when one thinks about the genre, nor is it acknowledged in recent critical work on television drama (see Lopes 2002; Pereira Jr. 2002; Fogolari 2002; Borelli 2001; Resende 2001; Araújo 2000; Costa 2000; Hamburger 2000; Trinta, 1997 among others).

[v] Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it was common for novela authors to practice self-censorship. Even today novela scripts must be submitted to censors, who can demand the excision of entire episodes or scenes deemed either politically or morally offensive. Ironically, perhaps, nudity has largely been permitted.

[vi] Throughout the 1970s-1980s, TV Globo held 70% audience share during prime time which, on occasions, hit nearly 100%. On such occasion was in 1986 when in its final days, Roque Santeiro (1985-1986)—a caustic satire of corrupted politicians—by Gomes, reached up to 98% of the Brazilian television audience tuned in (Herold, 1988).

[vii] Brazilian novelas are in fact exceptional in their mixing of fantasy and reality. Such capacity was clearly demonstrated in 1992 when actress Daniela Perez was killed by her on-screen boyfriend and his pregnant wife. The violent death of Perez, who had been working in *De Corpo e Alma* (Body and Soul, 1992/93), written by Gloria Perez (who happens to be Daniela’s mother in real life), created such a commotion that even the resignation of then President Fernando Collor faded into irrelevance.

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