

Telenovela and Gender in Brazil [i]

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Abstract

Using the example of one Brazilian telenovela this article proposes a way of understanding how television content can be a central factor in gender construction. The article presents one female character in the narrative that represents an archetypal female construction in Brazilian telenovelas, and shows how two middle-class female viewers of different ages enjoy this representation but interpret it in almost opposite ways. This article then shows how the telenovela text itself allows those readings, and discusses how this female construction and its possible readings can be interpreted as “gender technologies” according to De Lauretis proposition.

In this article, I propose a way of understanding how television content can be a strong factor in terms of gender construction in a society, using the example of one Brazilian telenovela. Still called the “eight o’clock telenovela,” even though they air at 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday, these narratives are the main fictional series aired by Rede Globo – the major TV network in the country. The telenovela examined here is *The Cattle King* (*O Rei do Gado*), which aired from June 1996 to February 1997 and reached ratings of about 50 percent throughout the country.

In order to understand how people deal with gender constructions they watch on TV, the space of possible meanings negotiations, how they discuss and interact, and how perhaps, in the long term, interacting with TV they incorporate some of those constructions, I use material from a seven months long telenovela reception ethnography I conducted in Montes Claros.[i] I spent that time in fieldwork, studying the interactions between TV and the everyday life of middle- and working-class families. While in Montes Claros I kept in touch with some families, watching the telenovela with them (about every three weeks in each home, depending on their availability and keeping contact throughout the whole narrative), as well as being present in other moments of their lives (going to church, parties, meeting with them casually, and so on). In each family, I usually got closer to one person – most often a woman around my age – with whom I negotiated the periodic visits and also spent a long time talking about many other matters. Television was the main focus of study, but whatever else worried them and was part of their everyday lives was also discussed whenever possible. After those months of sociability, I conducted in-depth interviews with the main informants and family members.

During that fieldwork, matters concerning social inequalities, an opposition between center (São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro) and periphery (Montes Claros as a smaller, countryside town), gender, race, and violence emerged as issues. My fieldwork took me to a place where sexism and gender inequalities emerged as major problems in social life, often stressed by women’s discourse and complaints. This was also my main object of study in terms of TV reception interacting with local values.

My ethnographic experience led me to what some cultural studies authors have called “radical contextualism”.[ii] In order to understand the meanings that people took from telenovela and television in general, the reference to their everyday lives was much more than background. The social reality lived as an everyday experience is the key to understanding how they interpret the messages coming from TV, the ways in which TV makes sense, revealing their likes or dislikes, and how they criticize or enjoy it. This seems an obvious conclusion for an anthropologist – ethnographic fieldwork is itself understood as this type of “radical contextualism,” and it supposes one can find the answers in social and cultural life. Ethnography here means not only long interviews, but participant observation and long-term research

living with those people, as it is usually considered in the academic field of anthropology. The context in which I was doing fieldwork had in fact an intricate social composition that nevertheless seemed to be a Brazilian traditional setting – coronelismo[iii], strong Catholic tradition, patriarchal families, and gender inequalities. My research focused on gender relations and constructions in TV content and reception in an effort to propose a model to interpret the role TV has played in social changes in the sphere of gender (and consequently family relations, sexuality, and body constructions) in Brazil.

In this paper I discuss the reception of gender representations in TV. I mention three examples of women, a telenovela character and two women who react to her behavior and features. Lia, the character from *O Rei do Gado*, is not the protagonist, but shares some features with various other female roles in several telenovelas. Lia was reminiscent of some melodramatic heroines (both from telenovelas or Hollywood productions) and TV viewers already knew her features, which made it easier for them to empathize, sympathize or identify with her. I have discussed elsewhere (Almeida, Hamburger & La Pastina, 1999) how narrative genre conventions are important to generate empathy and identification with some TV characters, and I return to this subject here. Lia's behavior was appropriate to some of those conventions; she was a rich, spoiled girl who had to break with her family, particularly her father, in order to have her love affair with a poor guitar player. She had to affirm her individuality and sever family ties to reach her true love.

Two middle-class women – Maysira, a 27-year-old university student, and Berenice, 60, a retired teacher – showed two different perspectives about Lia, a character they enjoyed and admired.[iv] Those points of view are closely linked to the “place from which one speaks.” That is, their points of view express who those women were, their family situations, life course, age, social class, aspirations, and gender positionings. I intend here to describe their understandings of the character in order to analyze how they reveal gender issues in media texts, in their reception, and even in the consumerist desire fostered through telenovelas.

I present below some descriptions and commentaries about the telenovela and its characters, based on previous reflections on those narratives. The fact that it is a melodramatic narrative based on the conventions of a protagonist romantic couple, with one or more villains disturbing their love relationship, is central to the understanding of reception.

It has been analyzed how telenovela characters are treated by frequent TV viewers as real people, whose lives are watched and vicariously lived on a daily basis. To treat characters as “real living people” is central for the emotional attachment to telenovelas, even if in other moments that same viewer might have a more critical and even ironic perspective toward the narrative. This daily relationship with characters is based on an “emotional realism,” as Ang (1985) described about Dallas viewers in her research. That means that telenovelas are not considered realistic in a strict sense, but they are in this emotional sense. The type of personal sentimental dramas is considered “true to life” – even if the main romantic couple is considered unrealistic, their sentimental conflicts are seen as verisimilar.

The text: one plot in *O Rei do Gado*

O Rei do Gado centered on Bruno, the cattle king from the title, and Luana, a poor landless rural worker (bóia-fria). As a rich man, but almost a hillbilly because of his accent, Bruno fell in love with his cousin, the Cinderella in this story. Although relatives, they did not know that in the beginning, for the family was split by a disagreement that took place two generations before. Luana's father had stolen Bruno's mother's inheritance and run away in the '40s. The consequent family feud was the major obstacle for the love realization of the main romantic couple.

Bruno was a sensitive hero, and the actor Antonio Fagundes guaranteed empathy for him. Viewers criticized him (the actor) because of his hillbilly accent. Bruno also was ambiguous because his wife in the beginning of the story, Leia, betrayed him, creating the joke “cuckold king,” instead of cattle king, mentioned mostly by male viewers. Female viewers in general found him sexy and nice – features of both actor and character. Bruno could be seen as a partial inversion from what was considered more usual and “normal” in Montes Claros: the fact that many men are unfaithful and most women feel men are

generally and “naturally” adulterous. Therefore, Bruno Mezenga, the cattle king, represented in fact a change in terms of gender constructions, and this change seemed to generate more female sympathy towards his character, considered more sensitive and affective than most actual men. On the other hand, and simultaneously, he was a cuckold in the beginning (before he met Luana) and this situation led to many jokes about him, particularly in male settings. But men also got involved in this narrative and admired the hard-working farmer he represented and who was in some ways a self-made man. Although he inherited land from his father, Bruno was presented in the narrative as a man who got richer on his own.

When the story started, Bruno was shown as a rich man with two young children – Marcos and Lia – and a rather unhappy marriage. A secondary plot revolved around Lia, the focus of this paper.

Lavinia Vlasik, a former model who had recently become an actress, performed the role of Lia. Therefore, I could not register any former empathy for her that could be lent to her character. Lia was initially shown as a rich, spoiled girl in her early 20s who had just overcome drug abuse. Her father, Bruno, was portrayed as partially responsible for his kids’ involvement with drugs. He was absent and only worried about his farms, land, business, and cattle, travelling in his plane or helicopter to his farms most of the time, leaving the kids by themselves with a reckless mother. Bruno was portrayed as a man of rural origin but also up-to-date in his business.

While traveling with her father to one of his farms, Lia, a city girl who, fell in love with a poor guitar player who lived temporarily on her father’s property (by the Araguaia River). She tried to seduce the guitar player, and he was strong enough to “tame the shrew.” In the narrative, Lia had to fight for his love because her father refused to accept the relationship. She ran away and married the guitar player, abandoning her rich lifestyle to travel around the country with her husband-singer. He then started a successful career as country music singer.

Lia was always dressed in the latest fashion. With her mother, she was the character who was best linked to fashion and the promotion of a certain consumerist lifestyle, indirectly selling what was then reasonably “up to date” in Brazil. Her clothes had the same style that was in many windows in Rio de Janeiro’s and São Paulo’s best shopping malls. This type of fashion usually gets popularized through telenovelas, reaching the middle and lower classes. When this happens, by the end of the narrative a year has passed and the clothes are not so fashionable any more for the upper classes. This happens with the majority of Globo’s telenovelas and that is one of the reasons they are considered by Montes Claros viewers as an expression of modernity and a way of reaching what is going on in the two metropolises.

The actor, singer, and guitar player Almir Sater, also a handsome media idol, performed the role of Lia’s boyfriend, Pirilampo. He was doing more or less the same character he always does in telenovelas: the rural singer and guitar player who wanders through the country. Before the narrative, he was greatly admired by the public, especially teen-age girls and young women who found him sexy and handsome. That recognition of what is partially already known is also a source of pleasure for audiences, favoring Almir Sater through the conflation of actor and character.

Audiences also saw Lia as a very pretty young woman, considered sexy and attractive by most male viewers. While she was struggling for her love, Lia faced her parents’ divorce after being the first one in the family to find out about her mother’s adulterous love affair. After this divorce, both Lia and her brother, Marcos, stayed with their father. Still, she tried to keep ties to her mother after she moved to another city.

Reception, gender identifications and readings

I intend to analyze two different interpretations about Lia that show how people identify with and relate to the telenovela. I focus on gender matters in this reinterpretation of a narrative performed by some viewers as the result of their intense relation with telenovelas. Maysira and Berenice are both telenovela fans, and regularly watch most Globo narratives.

Maysira, 27 and single, was born in a small town close to Montes Claros, where she attended the local

university. She lived in a boarding house and used to spend some weekends at her mother's home. Her mother had a very traditional and even conservative discourse; she complained about the excess of sex and nudity on TV, youngsters' lack of responsibility, the growth of divorces, and so on. Her mother's opinions seemed to fit what I saw as a traditional and locally more legitimate point of view, which led me to conclude about gender inequalities in the region.

On the other hand, Maysira did not fit exactly her mother's expectations. She was tuned to other types of female behaviors she considered she had learned partially from TV. She had an active sexual life and took contraceptive pills, but tried to keep her mother and family unaware of her behavior. She stated that local society was still very "machista" and told me she had to take care about her reputation in both towns, even if she could lead a relatively more independent life in Montes Claros.

She once told me her mother said that she was like a boy, because she was always going out to parties and bars, dancing, and being too independent. It was as if she crossed gender frontiers. Her behavior was like some other women I met in Montes Claros who also were targets of gossip and seemed to be offending traditional gender attitudes that were hegemonic in that context.

While feeling she had more freedom living in another town, Maysira mentioned her strong attachment to her family. She told me she had quit a love relationship because her mother thought her boyfriend was not good for her. She said it was a difficult decision, but she ended up agreeing with her mother because he was unfaithful. She admitted her family was right and chose to stay with them.

Maysira said she had learned much about a closer and "more intimate" love relationship through TV, but she did not understand family relations on telenovelas; she missed a "real" family experience. At the same time, she envied Lia's freedom and courage to face her family opposition and stay with her true love:

Maysira: I think she [Lia] is a strong, determined, responsible character. (...) She is firm in her decisions. She decided one thing and did not go back. She wanted it, wanted something, I mean her boyfriend, and her father did not want him. I went through the same thing! But I stayed with my family, protected.

Heloisa: Your family did not like your boyfriend?

Maysira: Exactly. And I was not strong enough to say, "I want this," and go after it. I don't know. But not with her... Her father said, "He is nothing. What is this?" But she fought; she didn't care about social class or anything. She is here, with him. I think that's interesting.

Maysira's case shows something about the interaction with telenovelas and potential gender identifications in it. Lia is similar to other telenovela characters in terms of her attitude and a gender construction that a woman has to break up with her family, and affirm her individuality, to reach true love. Viewers do not watch just one telenovela; they are a continuous part of their everyday lives for years. People like Maysira who enjoy telenovelas watch most of them, make lots of associations about past narratives, and remember many stories. Maysira herself had a great memory of them, recalling the plots, soundtracks, actors, and actresses of each one.

Lia reminded Maysira of the "independent woman" type. Even though Lia did not have a professional career, she almost did not notice that point. She just saw the aspect of the character that she most identified with and dreamed of. An independent woman was something she wanted to be and Lia was the character that best fit her expectations toward this construction. When she talked about her plans for the future she showed these ideas, although she was still economically dependent on her mother:

I plan to have a house of my own, to live by myself, be independent, something I've never had. First I need to study a lot to have a good job, than I can buy my house. My dream is to have my own house. (...) And preferably with my money.

Berenice had another life history, and analyzed Lia through a different point of view. Berenice and her

husband Bernardo were around 60 and very attached to the Catholic Church. They described their lives as a continuous and successful struggle to raise five children, all adults and married. Their three daughters were teachers like Berenice, a reason for pride in a lower-middle-class family. For them, to have a united and loving family was the most important aspect in life. They regretted some changes they saw in life in Montes Claros, such as the increasing rate of divorce and the fact that girls were starting their sexual lives before marriage, and they saw many of those cases as a bad influence from TV. Even though they criticized TV, they both watched and enjoyed telenovelas a lot, and they were very fond of "O Rei do Gado."

Berenice was a real telenovela fan, tried to pay attention to all details and turns in the narrative, and enjoyed very much the cattle king himself. But she agreed with her husband in many ways when he criticized the excess of sex in the narrative, where "everybody dates [has sex with] everybody." Bernardo said that a father should be a good example for his children; it is the only way to teach the right things and to be able to demand the same from his children. As Bruno, the cattle king, in the beginning of the story did not pay attention to his family, and after divorce brought his girlfriend Luana to live with him, he was not considered a good righteous father.

Bernardo: It is this negligence coming from the family, from the husband to his children and wife. Because he could have done that [sex out of wedlock], but his wife shouldn't. Or, if his wife has done that, he shouldn't. His children shouldn't either. I mean, they are a good example of a misfit family. (...) Then, what right has he to demand from his children? He has no right. Lia gets laid with the guitar player, Marcos with the other girl.

Berenice: Everybody there dates everybody.

Nevertheless, if family relations on the narrative were not the ideal, they realized that this was happening everywhere, particularly in big cities. Many times I saw this association between television and big cities. There was a proximity between what is shown on TV and what they think is the reality in metropolitan areas: TV is seen as revealing what is going on in places like Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo.

Berenice, when talking about Lia, a character she liked very much, built her interpretation from another point of view, differing a lot from Maysira's readings. Berenice told me she admired Lia when she tried to mediate and create a closer relationship between her father and brother in conflictive moments, as well as trying to keep a better relation among them and toward her mother (after her parents got divorced).

Heloisa: Which character do you like most?

Berenice: I like Lia very much. Lia is so cute. She always tries to make peace between her father and her brother; she tries to help when there is conflict. I like her very much.

For Berenice, it was not sensible when Lia ran away with Pirlampo, but it was understandable and forgivable in the context of a big city, and also counterbalanced in a way because she was being a good daughter and sister.

Those are two very different readings and interpretations of Lia. This difference reveals opposing personal contexts, points of view, and subjectivities through which the relation with the telenovela is established. Those two examples show distinct views about gender and behavior patterns. Berenice reveals her worries about sexuality and TV's negative influence, while Maysira shows that maybe telenovelas can portray gender constructions in a more open minded and even slightly feminist manner. Their main difference is in terms of age, and their features discussed here make these two examples similar to other women of their age and social class. Nevertheless, there were different readings if one compares middle-class and working-class readings, men's and women's points of view, and so on. I chose to stress here the difference in terms of generations, proposing that they might reveal cultural changes across the years.

Gender construction and consumption

I want to point to another matter concerning gender: body construction, particularly beauty and fashion patterns, promoted through TV and telenovelas. Lia, the character, and the actress who portrayed her matched all the requirements for the good interaction between telenovela and the promotion of beauty, strict body constructions, and a consumerist feminine style. Her slim, pretty body, the “perfect” face of a fashion model, and up-to-date clothes promoted many other aspects of a consumerist society. When Lia was “promoting” female behaviors seen as “modern” and bold in that context, she was also promoting a consumerist and fashion style, in a beautiful and sensual body perfectly fit for display on TV. As mentioned earlier, telenovelas usually launch and promote fashion throughout the country, popularizing what had been somewhat restricted to an elite.

These body patterns are also strong gender constructions. In Bordo’s (1993) words, it is a construction of the self located within consumer culture:

“With the advent of movies and television, the rules for femininity have come to become culturally transmitted more and more through standardized visual images.” (Bordo, 1993: 169)

Nevertheless, to reach that type, besides a lot of work and discipline, capital is needed. Considering social inequalities in Brazil, those body patterns are inaccessible to most women. Maysira, for example, never reached the body and weight she desired and was always unhappy about her looks. She was too “brown” and had curly black hair she used to have straightened as much as she could and dyed in a light brown color, denying vehemently any presence of black people among her kin. She had a bigger “problem” though: she thought she was quite fat and often tried new diets.

Besides tyranny and control over women (as Bordo emphasizes, 1993, p. 204), it is also a matter of creating more possibilities for consumption. As part of the search for a more beautiful appropriate body, many products find their market share: shampoos, hair color, diets, creams for dieting and cellulite, make-up, and fashion in general. All these were part of Maysira’s ideal and represented for her an idea of “modernity.” [v]

Gender Representation in Media and Reception

Many analyses about gender constructions in media show there are more than traditional (or patriarchal) models in cultural products. Christine Gledhill (1988), for example, when analyzing films, notes both traditional patriarchal feminine models, linked to melodramatic structures, as well as the need to present other gender representations. Her point is that cultural products need a certain amount of realism, showing modern types of femininity. This “realistic” index is a main aspect in cultural industry texts, as the “innovative” element that also appeals to certain audiences. Gledhill shows there are various, different, and even contradictory gender constructions in media texts. This double constitution allows the text to work both in a symbolic imaginary level, internal to the fiction, and in a more “realistic” level linked to social and historical context outside of the fiction itself.

“The modern popular drama, then exists as a negotiation between the terms of melodrama’s Manichean moral frameworks and conflicts and those contemporary discourses which will ground the drama in a recognizable verisimilitude. These conditions of aesthetic existence ensure the continual renewal of popular forms, the generation of renewed use values that will bring audiences back to the screen. Gender representations is at the heart of such cultural negotiation. For during a period of activist feminism, of social legislation for greater sexual equality and corresponding shifts in gender roles, gender and sexual definitions themselves became the focus of intense cultural negotiation.” (Gledhill, 1988: p.76)

Gledhill emphasizes distinct areas of meaning negotiation in media texts: institutional, the text itself, and reception. Texts usually have more than one meaning and also congregate conflictive meanings. This, nevertheless, does not lead to the idea that viewers are absolutely free to interpret anything. Viewers, as we have seen in the examples above, interpret things according to their context and according to the

chances the text itself allows, with rules and conventions of each genre limiting those interpretations.

De Lauretis (1987) proposes an investigation that discusses media as a “technology of gender.” Drawing from Foucault’s analyses about sexuality, she states that gender is not a natural property of bodies, but “the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors and social relations.” (p. 3) [vi] Gender is the product and process of various social technologies, and media is one of those technologies that constructs gender in our society (others could be even more powerful, as bio-medical apparatus).

In this perspective, gender representations are its own constitution as well, going on in various fields of cultural production and social experience. In a given context, there is not only one but many trends in this gender construction, even though one or more could be part of a hegemonic discourse. That is, some gender representations are considered “appropriated” in a given context, while others might be seen as “deviant” or socially disturbing. In the case of Montes Claros, the strong presence of the Catholic Church makes a more traditional view of gender prevalent, as the idea that men and women are essentially distinct, the female nature leading to motherhood, a masculine nature leading to adultery.

I want to discuss Brazilian telenovelas and their reception with this theoretical reference in mind. De Lauretis’ conception is a useful tool to debate Brazilian TV production and its gender representations. There are some types of constructions prevailing in certain time slots and TV genres, but in one program there may be heterogeneous and even conflictive gender representations, as in the case of telenovelas.

This heterogeneity in terms of media constructions allows the two opposing readings of the same character as I mentioned above. It also takes my reflection to the matter of reception. Subjects watching TV are always immersed in a given context that is their environment and also a set of powerful forces that produce those same subjects. In my fieldwork, I felt a context of strong gender inequality as one line of force. But there are various possibilities of readings and identifications, and the influences are not direct or simple, composing an object of study. Ien Ang (1991) proposes an interpretative model, which explains the role of the media in the construction of gendered subjects. She wants to go further than Lauretis, thinking about how it is that a gender technology like media takes part in gender construction in distinct contexts of social life.

In the same trend of gender theory, Ang also searches for a gender concept that escapes the essentialist perspective based upon the notion of an identity fixed upon sexual difference. She searches for a position that considers subjectivity as not unitary and produced through the intersection of various social practices and discourses that are heterogeneous and even contradictory. Subjectivity is then best described as many subject positions taken up by an individual. Discussing authors such as De Lauretis and Donna Haraway, Ang states that such subjectivity is never complete, but is continuously produced in the social contexts in which a person deals with heterogeneous practices and discourses.

Nevertheless, the understanding or reading of a character (as well as her gendered attitudes, including sexual behavior) is not direct or coherent and allows for distinct and even contradictory identifications; viewers watch, interpret, and get touched by parts of a story. It is not a media construction that is passively absorbed, but in fact it is negotiated with the terms, conditions, and oppressions lived daily by social beings. In Montes Claros, middle-class girls may admire Lia’s sexual freedom, for instance, but behaving like Lia is not socially acceptable in most situations – as when Maysira had to deal with her family and also faced the threat of gossip (that explains her “secrecy”).

The possibility of dealing with hegemonic trends as well as taking into account the heterogeneity of gender discourses and practices (some of those not socially legitimate) in society and in cultural production is the reason why I want to use this perspective. Furthermore, this perspective seems to be in accordance with the main points of other analyses about media reception, such as the idea that media can supply a cultural repertoire, as Stuart Hall’s (1980) work discusses. Another important consonance is with the perspective that subjects are not only mere “effects” of a text, and neither are media effects pre-determined, as David Morley (1989) has argued. And lastly, it seems to be more appropriated with the current reflections about gender, allowing a best comprehension about differences among women – a relevant matter for feminism itself. In this identifications, we can see how context operates. Age, social

class, life course, situation in the family and race, for example, account for different readings. Gender construction is thus seen as a cultural “effect” in a Foucauldian sense; many discourses, e.g. TV content, construct in people’s minds and attitudes what seems to be appropriate femininity and masculinity.

This was the best explanation to deal with my fieldwork data. The path I took was from empirical research to the search for a theoretic reference. Maysira shows an example that fits well with this perspective. She reads gender constructions of the text from a particular point of view, identifying with a representation she sees more through TV than around her in daily life. It even conflicts with the hegemonic concept in her hometown. Nevertheless, such type is hegemonic and ever present in TV content, particularly telenovelas and Hollywood romantic films. This allows her to take a position that contrasts with her mother position and expectations for her. Berenice suffers the same process, but considering female models in a distinct manner, based more on ideas of complementary roles in the family and what it means to be a good Catholic mother and grandmother. This takes her away from some attitudes she sees on TV, which she also thinks refer to a distant reality (“big city”). Nevertheless, the same telenovela also supplied Berenice other characters (female or male) for her to identify with.

A gender construction that is very usual in Brazilian telenovelas gets close to how Maysira understands and interprets Lia. Many people in Montes Claros mentioned telenovela heroines that are seen as “fighters,” independent career women who face many obstacles and suffering. Usually, those heroines are also means to spread the latest fashion also promoting a consumerist lifestyle, and directly (e.g. when the same actress is on TV ads for shampoo, as Lavinia Vlasik did) or indirectly promoting some products. [vii]

Endnotes

[i] This paper is part of a Ph.D. research, completed at the State University of Campinas, Brazil. The project was conceived from a larger telenovela reception research, where I did a reception ethnography in Montes Claros, a town with 250,000 inhabitants in the North of Minas Gerais State. The ethnography was first done as part of a larger research project, “The Social Impact of Television on Reproductive Behavior in Brazil”. It included professionals from different fields – anthropology, sociology, demography, communication – from different institutions (Cebrap, University of Campinas, Federal University of Minas Gerais, University of Sao Paulo in Brazil and University of Texas in USA), and was funded by Hewlett, MacArthur and Rockefeller Foundations. My individual research took on after the end of the collective one, since 1997. The Ph.D. project was funded by FAPESP, Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo.

[ii] See Ang, 1985 and Morley, 1986 and 1989.

[iii] “Coronelismo” here means a political and social situation that developed in Brazilian rural areas until the 1940’s, in which some landowners ruled political life. Such power is based on traditional families linked to lines of political power both locally and nationally, and organized in terms of exchange of favors and votes.

[iv] All personal names here are pseudonyms in order to keep their privacy.

[v] I have furthered analysed the complex interrelations between gender and consumption, also focusing on the same telenovela in my dissertation (Almeida, 2001).

[vi] Many gender theories propose a detachment from the idea of gender as a mere cultural representation over bodies already naturally sexed. The point is to go further and note how much even the idea of sex is a cultural construction itself. Thomas Laquer’s *Making Sex – Body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992) also departs from a Foucauldian perspective and shows the prevailing model of one sex for most of Europe’s history, being our current idea of two natural sexes something fairly recent in history. See also Butler (1990), Haraway (1991), Strathern and MacCormack (1980).

[vii] Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) mentions how TV serials in Egypt promote for young Bedouin women some consumption goods that may represent a change from older generations. Nevertheless, the search for such items in that context, where women are not allowed to work out of the home and where they do not have access to the monetary economy, means also new forms of male domination over women.

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