

# **Fraught with contradictions: The production, depiction, and consumption of women in a Venezuelan telenovela**

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on a Venezuelan telenovela, *El País de las Mujeres* [The Country of Women], produced by Venezuelan network Venevisión and broadcast to high ratings in Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Using textual analysis and in-depth interviews with the production team and audience members, I analyze how Venezuelan women are depicted through *El País de las Mujeres*' stories, characters, dialogue and visual images, and how viewers receive these representations and incorporate them in their everyday lives. The study underscores how media executives, writers, actors, audiences and media texts participate in a ritual process to establish shared meanings. This process is immersed in culture (Venezuela) and in the social formation's power differentials (patriarchy).

Latin American telenovelas stand out as a genre that has successfully challenged its U.S. counterpart—the soap opera—in a global media environment increasingly dominated by the United States. The fascination with the genre is worldwide. Every day huge audiences that transcend nation, class, culture and gender differences sit in front of the television to watch episodes of one, two or more telenovelas, “the most watched television genre globally” (McAnany & La Pastina, 1994, p. 828). Presently, Globo (Brazil), Televisa (Mexico) and Venevisión (Venezuela) are the leading telenovela producers (Sinclair, 1999). In short, the telenovela has become a significant cultural phenomenon that challenges the assumption that globalization equals “American.”

Notwithstanding their international success, telenovelas are inextricably linked to the Latin American culture(s) that manufacture and consume them. This article focuses on a Venezuelan telenovela, *El País de las Mujeres* [The Country of Women], produced by Venevisión and broadcast to high ratings in Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. I analyze how Venezuelan women are depicted through *El País de las Mujeres*' stories, characters, dialogue and visual images, and how viewers receive these representations and incorporate them in their everyday lives.

*El País* tells the stories of a family of six women's individual search for happiness. Mariana, Pamela, Miranda, Julia and Chiqui are cousins. Their aunt, Arcadia, has raised them because their own mothers are either dead or absent. *El País* also focuses on Arcadia's friend, Catalina, who overcomes domestic abuse. These storylines are instrumental to the telenovela's overall critique of machismo and its ensuing female submission. *El País* provides a particularly appropriate case study. It is a successful Venezuelan text conceived by its author, Leonardo Padrón, as a vehicle to pay homage to Venezuelan women (Gómez, 1998). Examining the production and consumption of this telenovela furthers the analysis of how women (and men) are socialized into their expected roles, and the media's contribution to this process. Venezuela is dominated by ideologies of machismo and marianismo,[i] *El País de las Mujeres* provides an important opportunity to analyze the overt and covert ways in which the media help establish the parameters under which the term “woman” is defined, and the potential of these parameters to objectify, oppress or empower women. As importantly, this case study allows us to examine the necessary exchanges that occur between media texts and its producers and consumers.

## **Telenovela research**

Latin American scholars have been at the forefront of academic research about telenovelas. In the 1970s, country-specific studies dominated the research agenda, which included the work of Rector (1975) about

Brazil, and Coccato's historiography of Venezuelan telenovelas (1979). In addition, this decade saw the theoretical work of Morana (1978) and Verón (1978) that established semiotics as one of the dominant approaches to the study of the genre.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Latin American communication scholars drew on sociology and cultural theory as they searched for a theoretical framework to explain how telenovelas are linked to questions of nationality, cultural identity and modernity (Aprea & Mendoza Martínez, 1996; Fadul, 1993a, 1993b; González, 1993; Lopez, 1995; Lozano, 1989; Martín-Barbero, 1987, 1988, 1993, 1995; Martín-Barbero & Muñoz, 1992; Martín-Barbero & Rey, 1999; Verón & Chauvel, 1997).

Empirical studies looked at telenovelas from different perspectives. Production and marketing were examined in Brazil (Sodré, 1984; Tavola, 1984), Perú (Quiroz, 1993) and Mexico (González, 1988). Textual and content analysis included the work of Martín-Barbero and Muñoz (1992), and Lager (1992) about Colombian telenovelas, and Geddes-González (1993) and Quiroz (1993) in Perú. Audience studies focused on the insertion of telenovelas in each country/culture's everyday life: Brazil (Sluyter-Beltrão, 1993; Tufte, 1993; Klagsbrunn, 1997; Borelli, 1997), Mexico (Bustos-Romero, 1993; González, 1993; Uribe Alvarado, 1993), Argentina (Mazziotti & Borda, 1997), Colombia (Muñoz, 1992) and Venezuela (Barrios, 1988; Mendoza, n/d).

European and North American scholars are increasingly interested in telenovelas. In 1985, Rogers and Antola noticed how these Latin American products successfully competed with U.S. imports. In addition, Vink (1988) examined the potential for social change of Brazilian telenovelas, and Straubhaar analyzed the relationship between these serials and political changes in Brazil (1988). Important volumes about soap operas around the world acknowledged the genre's importance by including chapters and information about telenovelas (Allen, 1995; O'Donnell, 1999; Matelski, 1999). Additionally, in Italy, Pozzato (1995) studied the "rosa" genre, and in Spain, Guaderrama (1995) analyzed the press coverage of the Spanish "telenovela boom." European and U.S. scholarship also included McAnany and La Pastina's review of existing telenovela audience research (1994), Tufte's examination of the socio-cultural role of telenovelas in Brazil (2000), and La Pastina's analysis of product placement in Brazilian telenovelas (2001).

In spite of this extensive body of scholarship, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that examine simultaneously two or more aspects, e.g.: production and reception, or text and reception. Empirical comprehensive studies are still the weakest aspect of communication research, and telenovela scholarship is no exception (Tufte, 2000). This analysis addresses this weakness by examining the production, text and reception of *El País de las Mujeres*.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study draws on feminist media studies, which calls for "more feminist work on media production, representation and influence" (Kitzinger, 2001, p. 100) and acknowledges that "the conditions of representation have changed as the dominant media take up certain ideas about feminism, gender, women and men" (Probyn, 2001, p. 35). My analysis is also influenced by Gramsci's concept of hegemony—the production of consensus for cultural practices and ideas that will sustain power relations (1971). The deployment of hegemony has greatly influenced cultural studies' notion of popular culture as a crucial site of ideological conflict in which power relations of gender, ethnicity, class, and identity are struggled over.

*El País de las Mujeres* presents a fictional world that has connections with, and draws on, the discourses present in the social formation. Consequently, this study embraces cultural studies' broad conception of culture as a "site of social differences and struggles" (Johnson, 1986/87, p. 39). This notion of culture delivers a brand of cultural studies that examines not only texts, but also their production, consumption, and influence in the regulation of cultural life. It also shares with feminist media studies the understanding that the study of culture and communication is both an intellectual and a political activity.

## Methods

I examined the telenovela's representation of Venezuelan women through textual analysis. Individual interviews with the head writers and actors allowed me to study the production aspects of these depictions while the consumption perspective was examined through individual and group interviews with audience members. The text analyzed included all episodes of *El País de las Mujeres*. The shows were taped and then analyzed following the three steps described by Stuart Hall in his "Introduction" to *Paper Voices* (1975). First, a "long preliminary soak" (p. 15) in the text, which allows the analyst to focus on particular issues while preserving "the big picture." Second, close reading of the chosen text and identification of discursive strategies and themes. Third, interpretation of the findings within the larger framework of the study.

In-depth interviews with head writer Leonardo Padrón and with actors were conducted in Caracas. Actors were interviewed once for one-two hours. Padrón was interviewed twice within a year. His interviews lasted for three and two hours respectively. I prepared different interview guides for the actors and for Padrón, given their different roles in the production process.

Thirty-nine audience members were interviewed, either individually or in small groups. They were recruited using the snowball sampling technique (Rubin, 1986; Press, 1991; Brown, 1994, Weiss; 1994). The group was heterogeneous. Thirty-two women and seven men participated in the study. Their age range was 18-75 years old, and they were spread among the five socioeconomic strata present in Venezuela. Their highest educational levels ranged from elementary to graduate school. In addition, all marital states were represented. Participants included eleven professionals, two teachers, seven clerks, three maids, two retirees, eleven students, and three homemakers. The length of these interviews ranged from one to two hours. An interview guide was prepared along with a videotape with excerpts from *El País* that were used as prompts for the conversation. All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Pseudonyms were assigned for confidentiality.

## Analysis[ii]

Head writer Leonardo Padrón conceptualized *El País* as a "telenovela with a thesis," in which he would showcase women's daily struggles and triumphs by underscoring the double standards between men and women that dominate Venezuelan society. In addition to his writing duties, Padrón was an important decision-maker regarding casting choices. He "stitched each character to each actor," fostering, in this way, the characters' credibility (Leonardo Padrón, May 2000).

## Women in a Country of Machistas

Machismo and Marianismo are the two prongs of the brand of patriarchy that underpins Venezuelan society. These ideologies determine some of the conditions that define women's (and men's) everyday life in Venezuela. First, women's participation in the workforce is the outcome of financial need, not the product of a true acknowledgement of equal rights for both genders (McClenaghan, 1997). In addition, women who work outside their homes are still responsible for domestic work, and expected to juggle multiple roles. Second, there is a significant incidence of male infidelity and a sociocultural legitimization of this behavior. On the other hand, women's infidelity is not socially accepted. Third, domestic violence is a widespread problem in all socioeconomic levels. Fourth, abortion is illegal, unless the mother's life is in danger. In sum, women's lives are centered on the reproductive responsibilities of taking care of others, which, in turn, define their moral worth. Women endure infidelity and, in many cases, violence. And their participation in the workforce is framed by patriarchy "in a context where no alternative ideological models exist" (González de la Rocha, 1994, p. 290).

Padrón set out to "pay homage to women" through the show's female characters who endure many of the problems and situations that determine women's everyday life in Venezuela. In this way, Padrón envisioned his telenovela as a critique of Venezuelan machismo. He explained, however, that previous writing experiences had taught him that Venezuelan viewers are not receptive to critical telenovelas, and

that he had learned that “you must deal with certain topics using an indirect approach, or using humor, which is a wonderful analgesic in our culture” (Leonardo Padrón, May 2000). Therefore, *El País de las Mujeres* uses irony, hyperbole, caricature and clever twists of the plot to ridicule some of the dominant Venezuelan ideas that diminish and oppress women. In the process, the telenovela’s female characters struggle against and resist the dominant Venezuelan view that women are defined by, or in relation to, men.

## Objects

Arsenio leaves his wife of 22 years, Arcadia, for a young woman, a former prostitute who he simply calls “el hembrón,” a Venezuelan expression used by men to describe a woman with a perfect body. By referring to her as “el hembrón,” Arsenio demeans this woman by reducing her to a body. When his friend Rodolfo respectfully calls her “Miss,” Arsenio replies that she is not a “señorita” but his “hembrón,” a trophy that deserves no respect, one that enhances his masculinity: “I am more a man than you are, I have more money, and I have my hembrón sitting there.” She is his possession, he owns her body, and her sole function is to be his sexual toy: “in this bed you justify your place in the planet.”

Most audience members interviewed (participants) agreed that this is a realistic representation of many Venezuelan men, who believe that women should be “like a Chinese vase, an ornamental figure, someone who doesn’t speak, but who looks like Cindy Crawford” (MILAGROS). Furthermore, participants argued that many women like playing this role because of financial reasons: “they like the designer watch, the designer clothes and eating in good restaurants” (BETTY). MIRIAM admitted that Arsenio and “el hembrón” disgusted her, nevertheless, she loyally tuned into *El País* every evening. Participants were happy that the telenovela’s plot does not grant success to the men who objectify women as sexual toys to be possessed. These characters have tragic or sad endings that highlight how the emphasis on women’s physical attributes and the pleasure men derive from them are misguided and unfair attitudes that deny women any agency in the conduction of their own lives.

Closely related to the representation of women as sexual objects is the representation of women as food. Venezuelans typically use words like “sabroso [scrumptious],” “divino [divine]” and “delicioso [delicious]” to describe food as well as enjoyable experiences. In *El País*, some male characters refer to women with these words. Furthermore, there are direct comparisons between women and food, especially when men refer to the character Almendra, whose name literally means almond. One of her friends calls her “mi frutica [my fruit].” But it is Lucas, a married man who is infatuated with her, who invariably objectifies her as (delicious) food to be consumed. “I want to eat her with butter, like popcorn.” He goes on to describe Almendra as good quality beef: “she is fresh meat...tender, tender, tender.” When Lucas is confronted by one of his friends about his continuous infidelities, he equates his lovers with spicy food by saying that, once in a while, it is good to eat some spicy food for a change, when you have everyday access to “el dulce [sweets]” referring to his wife.

Without exception, participants felt that there was nothing demeaning about referring to women as food. They highlighted how equating food with “good things” is typical of Venezuelan culture, and how babies are also talked about as food. “Está divino [she’s divine]” and “está de comérselo [you could eat her]” are common expressions. For his part, Padrón declared that he chose the name Almendra “without looking for any metaphors, simply because I had met someone with that name, and thought it was a rare, beautiful name.” He admitted, however, that once he knew that actor Gabriela Vergara, a former Miss Venezuela contestant, would play the role, he spiced the dialogues with allusions to Almendra’s name. Like the participants, he agreed that it is a part of Venezuelan culture, and that no objectification of women is implied (Leonardo Padrón, December 2000).

## In Need of Domestication

Because women are reduced to objects by some male characters, these men see any indication of independent thought or agency as a deviation that must be corrected. These characters sometimes refer to women as wild animals in need of domestication. Echoing a popular Venezuelan expression, women

are repeatedly called “cuaimas [poisonous serpents].” Rodolfo, Lucas and Arsenio, the three archetypical machista male characters, typically refer to women as mares who need to be tamed since some of them “still buck.” But domestication goes beyond taming; women need to be in the domestic environment, and this domestication must be achieved by any means necessary, even violence is appropriate if deemed necessary. After all, women belong to their men, and men can do with their women whatever they want:

Lucas: that homemaker happens to be my woman, and she's mine...I want you to understand it because if I want to beat her up, not only with my fists but with a baseball bat, nobody has to interfere, do you understand?

.....

Lucas: you need to treat women badly so they are straightened out.

Jacobo: and do you treat yours like that?

Lucas: mmm...I have her tamed! Catalina, the soup...Catalina, the blue socks. Shut up, Catalina, and bring me my meal!

Lucas is a policeman who treats his wife Catalina as if she was his servant, expecting her to produce perfect meals, ironed shirts, a clean house, and to have no thoughts or opinions of her own. He is continuously unfaithful to her and puts her down at every opportunity. Catalina is thoroughly absorbed by her domestic duties and does not realize that Lucas does not respect her. She numbs herself with housework in order to avoid the realization that she is in a loveless marriage. Catalina eventually recognizes Lucas' infidelity and leaves him when he beats her. She changes her life, goes back to college and remarries, moving her life away from the demeaning pattern of being a domesticated, “tamed” woman.

In this way, through Lucas and Catalina's failed marriage and Catalina's rebuilding of her life, Padrón disqualifies machismo, “a well-established and destructive cultural pattern” (Leonardo Padrón, May 2000) and its ensuing female submission. It is important to underscore that machismo is pervasive in Venezuela. For instance, actor Gustavo Rodríguez, who played Lucas, justified his character arguing that Lucas was “a man who's very much alone” (Gustavo Rodríguez, May 2000). Furthermore, a male university professor that I interviewed because of his interest in the topic of telenovelas exclaimed, “From my perspective, Venezuela is the least machista country in the world!”

Participants were divided along age lines about their perceptions of domestication, domestic abuse and machismo. Older participants stated that domestic abuse is an issue for the lower socioeconomic classes only, and that machismo has subsided (MIRIAM, HILDA, BERTHA, GRETA). In contrast, younger viewers declared that the belief that women belong in the domestic sphere is still widespread:

Many men still have that idea. That women have to be in their homes, doing all the domestic chores, while they are the ones who have the right to be out, to work, to go to parties...and the woman...always in the house (MARTA).

In addition, younger participants believe that domestic abuse is a problem “across the board”(ANDREA), “much worse than what they show in this telenovela” (NORA), and that machismo still permeates Venezuelan life. This difference of opinion between older and younger participants suggests a different perception of the ostensible change in male and female roles in Venezuela. For older participants, the improvement is evident since “both [men and women] must earn money for the household; in consequence, men respect women more...they even help some with household chores” (MIRIAM), “it's so much better than what we had” (BERTA). For younger participants, however, there is no real change: women are “allowed” to work outside the home only because their income is needed.

## **Servants**

An important consequence of the dominant view that women belong in the domestic environment is the

conceptualization of women as mere homemakers in charge of domestic chores. In addition to the already-mentioned male characters—Arsenio, Rodolfo, Lucas—Padrón used the character Josefina to criticize this notion. Josefina travels to Caracas to visit her son, Diego, and finds, to her horror, that he is living with unconventional Miranda, who dresses in black, has a tattoo on her shoulder and works as a bartender in her family's restaurant. Josefina inspects her son's apartment and finds that neither the cleaning, nor the meals are up to her high standards. She blames Miranda for this, squarely stating that it is a woman's job to keep a perfect home:

Diego: Mom, look, Miranda and I work and you can't expect us to come home tired from our jobs to polish the doorknobs.

Josefina: No, not both of you, her! Because she is the woman, she is the one that has to attend to your needs. Does she know how to cook?

Miranda makes it clear that she is Diego's partner, not his maid. To no avail, Diego tries to explain to his mother that he loves Miranda for who she is, not because she can be his servant. But Josefina readily dismisses him and his view: "You don't really mean that. Nowadays, there's a bunch of men pretending to be modern, but deep down, they also like to have a little woman who will fix their meals, attend their wishes and pamper them."

Because Josefina is a nagging, old-fashioned mother-in-law, a humorous character that seems out-of-date, her views also seem obsolete. There is an element of pride, however, in Josefina's view of housework that is absent in the male characters' view of domestic chores who see housework as "not a real job" that is, nevertheless, expected from women. Lucas, who demands that Catalina be his brainless servant constantly diminishes her and what she does:

Catalina: but, honey, I'm tired too.

Lucas: tired of what? Of what, Catalina? Are you going to compare the three or four little things that you do here at home...are you going to compare them to my job in the streets? Oh, no, no, no...Please!

When Catalina finally separates from Lucas and starts looking for a job, she faces this dominant view as she is disregarded by employers who claim she has no experience, that she is someone "who doesn't know how to do anything." Hurt, after her futile job search, she blurts to a prospective employer:

Catalina: It's not that I don't know how to do anything, no! I know how to do many things; I can tell you...I know how to wake up every day at dawn to take my children to school. I know that we always need onions in the house and when we're running out of sugar, and that we need to pay the phone bill...If you want numbers, here they are: at least 18 thousand ironed shirts, 200 thousand mopped floors, five thousand lunchboxes fixed, and at least three million dishes rigorously washed every day of my life...and who knows how many pot roasts, and...you might think this is unbelievable, but I know how to be responsible, which I think is the most important quality for any job. But, of course, you don't care...excuse me, then, but I must pick up my son at his school.

Since domestic chores are seen as less important than what men do, some of the male characters refer to women as inferior and anti-intellectual. They dismiss women's conversations as filled with "estupideces [stupid topics]" and call them "brutas [dumb]."

At the same time, however, El País has other male characters—Camilo, Jacobo, Diego—who value women as partners in both the public and private spheres. Female characters love these men; precisely because of the respect they show them. More importantly, Catalina, the female character that best represents the feminine submission that invariably accompanies machismo, rebels and changes her life until she finds her own voice and a new love (Jacobo) that values her for who she is, not for what she can do for him.

Padrón's intention to censure the widespread machista conception of women as "la quinta hornilla de la

cocina [the fifth burner in the stove]" and its related devaluation of domestic work is perceived by the participants as one of the best features of the telenovela. A daily reality that needs to be criticized since house work "isn't valued" (NELLY), "has no recognition" (ZULAY), "is hard work" (MARTA), and "is considered 'helping' for men, but an obligation for women" (CLARA). CAMILA, who is the full-time worker of her family (her spouse spends more time at home than her since he works part-time as an university adjunct), declared that housework "is devalued, no matter who does it, women or men." In addition, participants found much realism in the dialogues and storylines centering on marianismo's canon that women are inferior and belong in the household. These audience members profoundly disliked Rodolfo, Arsenio and Lucas, while they admired and fancied Camilo, Diego and Jacobo.

## Venezuelan Women/Venezuelan Beauties

An important element of Venezuelan culture is the emphasis Venezuelans place on physical beauty. In a recent Roper poll, Venezuelans topped a list of 30 countries as the people most preoccupied with their physical appearance:

65 percent of women say they think about the way they look all the time, as do 47 percent of Venezuelan men. These figures are well beyond the global average, which is 23 percent of women and 16 percent of men who say they think perpetually about the way they look (Goode, 1999, p. 4).

In a country where 80 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, spending a fifth of the income on personal grooming and care is not uncommon (Rohter, 2000). In Venezuela, the broadcast of the Miss Venezuela beauty pageant is given an importance similar to that given to the Super Bowl in the U.S. Even coffee table books featuring the country's beautiful beaches, mountains and jungles, now include photos of the pageant and its contestants, making Venezuelan women an official part of the country's landscape.[iii] Plastic surgery is so common that even though the country boasts one doctor for every 477 habitants, the country's health indicators are far from standard[iv] since a large percentage of medical students specialize in plastic surgery (Wallerstein, 2000). In sum, "looking good" is given tremendous importance, and women's lives are framed by this cultural precept. In *El País*, like in many Hollywood productions, beautiful actors, many of them former Miss Venezuela contestants, play most female characters.

"My homage to women wasn't uncritical. [...]; for instance, through the telenovela I flagrantly mocked this country's exaggerated need for plastic surgery," explained Padrón, adding that Venezuelan women are now "a mix of blood and silicone." Padrón chose actor Viviana Gibelli, "who's practically reconstructed... you know she has artificial breasts, artificial cheeks...a reconstructed woman" to play the role of Pamela, a character that admits being "addicted" to all beautifying procedures. In other words, Padrón conflates Pamela, the character, with Gibelli, the actor. Then, he delivers his critique—soaked in humor and irony—through Pamela and plastic surgeon Rodolfo.

Women go to Rodolfo's office in search of the physical perfection they believe will help them get and/or hold on to men. Rodolfo, like many Venezuelan plastic surgeons, has a successful career thanks to the women that endlessly parade through his office in search for a new nose, mouth, breasts, thighs or buttocks that will give them the partner (or the self-esteem) they crave. For instance, on the first episode, a woman enters Rodolfo's office and introduces herself:

Woman: Altagracia López, born in Caracas, attorney, 41 years old, two children with an imbecile husband that is ga-ga for a stupid brunette whose breasts are bigger than soccer balls.

Rodolfo: and what do you want from me?

Woman: (undressing) look at me, what do you think, ah?

Rodolfo: (walking around her and looking at her body with studious attitude) A nice treatment to dissolve the fat. Maybe some cell therapy to regenerate the tissues, liposuction in the zones most in need, correction of the double-chin, a glycolic peeling, and... why not? Two good doses of silicon in your

breasts...and we will be ready to destroy that stupid brunette that has your husband somewhat distracted.

For Pamela, physical appearance is of paramount importance. She is a starlet who tries to compensate her lack of talent with a perfect face and body, which she displays shamelessly in tight, revealing clothes. Rodolfo proudly calls her his “masterwork” since she is an assiduous visitor to his office, asking him to inject with collagen “this small wrinkle that I’m getting,” or to give her a deep peel. In a funny episode, Pamela gets a disfiguring allergic reaction from collagen injections the day she has to audition for an important television role. She struggles immensely to get through this difficult day without her best weapon: her beauty.

Pamela's obsession with her body is such that when she realizes that her love for Camilo is unrequited, she has an emotional conversation with her agent in which she reflects on why Camilo does not love her:

Pamela: Camilo doesn't love me. Listen to me, Raymond, all the men in this country love me, but he doesn't. And I don't know...I don't know what else to do.

.....

Pamela: (she opens her robe and shows him her body) Look at me, look at me... why doesn't he love me? What is it that I don't have? What am I missing? What other surgery should I have? What else should I do so that Camilo loves me?

Like many Venezuelan women, Pamela bases her whole life on her physical beauty. According to the plot, her beauty is sufficient to achieve fame in the entertainment world (she makes it to Hollywood), but is not enough to find love (she ends up alone). Beauty, then, is depicted as being overrated in Venezuela.

In our conversation, actor Gibelli never mentioned these subjects—beauty, plastic surgery. She focused, instead, on Pamela's personality traits. The viewers, however, had extensive comments about these issues. All participants felt that the topics' portrayal, although funny, were realistic. They agreed that the use of plastic surgery is widespread in the country. However, their interpretation of this fact varies. Some viewers assured me that women have plastic surgery because they want/need to keep/recover their partner. Others disagreed, stating that most women do it because “of themselves.” For instance, ANDREA, who had surgery to augment her breasts, said, “what we want is a little boost to our self-esteem, we want to look good...but, for ourselves.” GRACIA, CLARA and ELSA also admitted having plastic surgery because they wanted to “look better” and “feel good” about themselves.

Regardless of the intention behind the decision to undergo plastic surgery, participants acknowledged that there is an obsession with physical appearance in Venezuela. Some blamed men: “the guys I know don't even talk to you if you don't look like a Miss [Venezuela]” said LILIAN. JOSEFINA agreed, “if you're not sexy, you have no life because most guys are looking for someone who looks good; feelings aren't important anymore, looks are.” Others believe this national obsession is the product of the Venezuelan “myth” that “this is the country of beautiful women, so... if you're not gorgeous, you're useless...even if you're smart” (GRACIA). Notwithstanding these acknowledgements, participants did not seem willing to resist this oppressive cultural tenet. Most of the women interviewed admitted that they would have plastic surgery if they felt they needed it. Lower income female participants wished they could afford the procedure, “I'd like to lose weight, have a peeling, do this, do that...in the end, I can't afford it...so, I must accept myself like I am” (LAURA). For their part, male participants assume the importance of women's physical beauty and the widespread use of plastic surgery as one more element of Venezuelan life. “It's like straightening your teeth with braces... it's been socially accepted...everywhere...it's normal,” said CESAR.

The Venezuelan emphasis on physical appearance has consequences for the culture's view of older women. Since so much importance is given to physical beauty, an ephemeral trait, Venezuelan women are terrified of the aging process. *El País* alludes to this topic through the stories of Arcadia and Catalina. When Arsenio leaves Arcadia he gives her the following reasons:



Arsenio: why did I leave you for another woman? Because I was sick of you, Arcadia. No, not sick, but bored, that is, bored! Because your face bored me, because life had become a yawn...always the same comments, the same food and making love the same way for 25 years. No! No! Too long! And with an added bonus...that you're done, that you're wrinkled, that you're old!

This view is similar to that expressed in Venezuela's humorous television shows in which older women are the butt of jokes that contrast them with their younger counterparts; stressing that, because of their age, they cannot compete for men's affections anymore. The dominant view is that as women age they become ugly, boring and worthless. As Lucas tells Catalina, "remind me tomorrow to give you a check so you can go to the doctor...did you know that they give hormones to women your age?"

Female characters in the telenovela are acutely aware of this cultural view, and voice their opinions regarding the injustice of a society in which men do not age, but women do. In an empowering twist of the plot, Arcadia, scorned by her former husband because of her age, marries Daniel, a man 15 years younger than her. Catalina, also ridiculed for her age, marries Jacobo and has a baby. Furthermore, the love stories of Arcadia/Daniel and Catalina/Jacobo include lovemaking scenes as sexy and tender as those of the younger couples. Arcadia and Catalina's stories validate middle-aged women in a society that seems to have no use for them.

Participants, however, are ambivalent about the stories of Arcadia and Catalina. Although they acknowledge that "Venezuelan women feel a lot of anxiety when they start aging" (MIRIAM), many did not approve of Arcadia's and Catalina's new relationships. Younger participants even expressed "disgust" with Arcadia and Daniel's age difference (NELLY, MAYRA, CONSUELO, AMANDA, MARIA, CORINA, PATRICIA, NINA). In contrast, female actors were happy to see these stories since they feel tremendous pressure to "stay thin and young" in a medium that discards (or relegates to secondary roles) actresses who do not look young: "if you look good and young, then you can get some good roles" (Julie Restifo, May 2000). At the same time, these actors do what it takes to keep their jobs, be it plastic surgery, diet or exercise.

In sum, even though the people interviewed acknowledge the Venezuelan obsession with beauty, laugh at Pamela as the embodiment of this obsession, and admit the pressure they feel to look good, participants are more amenable to go under the knife to enhance or perpetuate their beauty than they are willing to resist the hegemonic message that beauty is the basis of happiness.

## Conclusions

This study highlights the connections between culture and media as sites of struggle over meanings. Symbolic work is performed in every moment of the circuit of culture. Production, representation, identity, consumption and regulation are underpinned by Venezuelan cultural references (Condit, 1989), and immersed in a patriarchy-dominated social formation that tends to be conservative.

The process, namely the exchanges between these moments, is fraught with contradictions. For instance, the writer delivers a critique of Venezuela's obsession with physical beauty and plastic surgery; but he casts beautiful female actors in the main roles. In other words, he showcases role models, but they look like models. Therefore, there is a visual reinforcement of the need to undergo plastic surgery even as we watch the critique of such procedures. On the consumption side, audience members readily accept the telenovela's critique of overuse of plastic surgery, but nevertheless feel compelled to use these procedures themselves. In other words, all the women interviewed, actors and viewers, acknowledge and buckle to the pressure of a society in which the importance of women's beauty has reached mythical proportions. In addition, *El País'* empowering stories about middle-aged women—Arcadia and Catalina—elicit a mixed reaction in the audience: satisfaction about the way these women overcome their problems, and disgust towards their new relationships. This suggests that for some issues, the media text faces difficulties when it challenges well-established cultural tenets.

There is also friction between the commercial requirements of the genre (high ratings) and the creative needs and ideological intentions of production. Underprivileged viewers, who make 80% of Venezuela's

population, provide the high ratings that determine a telenovela's success. Network executives know that if a telenovela "no sube cerro [doesn't reach the slums and shantytowns that are located in the hills surrounding Caracas]" it will fail. Therefore, "the message has to be very rudimentary, very primary, lots of repetition and reiteration...highly conservative: crime and punishment, sin and vindication" (Javier Vidal, May 2000). Hence, many network executives avoid producing telenovelas that portray reality, social issues and critique. However, *El País de las Mujeres*' success suggests that social critique can be successfully knit into a Venezuelan telenovela, as long as there is a sense of "crime and punishment" (e.g.: Arsenio leaves wife Arcadia for a young prostitute, he ends up murdered by his lover) and "sin and vindication" (e.g.: Catalina allows verbal and emotional abuse that annul her; she leaves this relationship and finds a voice and a new life).

In this sense, production and consumption, traditionally viewed as opposite, are deeply articulated. Consumers (viewers) are implicated and drawn into the practice of cultural production. Even though Padrón tries not to "betray" his characters by changing them at the public's whim,[v] he is ever mindful of the fine line he walks between delivering his message, and the cultural patterns that define his Venezuelan audience. In short, the writer's goal is "to have it all:" voice his criticism and achieve high ratings. In Martín-Barbero's words, telenovelas are a site of "mediations" between production, reception and culture (1987; 1993).

In sum, Venezuelan telenovelas contribute to "the very material ... of daily life" (Willis, quoted in Turner, 1996, p. 2). They have tremendous significance in the everyday life of those who produce and consume them. This study also suggests that the communication process is never neutral (Hall, 1982; Johnson, 1986/87; Gurevitch & Scannell, 2003). Media executives, writers, actors, audiences and media texts participate in a ritual process to establish shared meanings. This process is immersed in culture (Venezuela) and in the social formation's power differentials (patriarchy). As we understand how this ritual process and the genre work, we will have a better comprehension of the telenovela's potential as a tool for social improvement, and we will be reminded—yet again—that the power of a text or cultural practice, such as a telenovela, "lies not in what it says or means but in what it does within its culture" (Grossberg, 1983-84, p. 108).