

## **The centrality of telenovelas in Latin America's everyday life: Past tendencies, current knowledge, and future research**

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Every evening, millions of viewers throughout Latin America tune in their television sets to watch telenovelas. For more than thirty years now telenovelas have dominated primetime programming on most of the region's television. And here Latin America refers to more than a geographic area: it covers a culturally constructed region that goes from the southern tip of South America to the United States, where one can watch daily telenovelas on the two Hispanic networks, Univision and Telemundo,[i] and Canada. In the last few decades Brazilian and Mexican telenovelas, and to a lesser extent Venezuelan, Colombian, Argentineans and others, have been exported to more than a hundred nations around the world (Melo, 1988). In this increasingly international scenario, Latin American telenovelas have been aired in other Portuguese and Spanish speaking markets, and in dubbed and sometimes edited versions in many different national contexts (Allen, 1995; McAnany, 1984; Melo, 1988; Sinclair, 1996; Straubhaar, 1996). This international presence has challenged the traditional debate of cultural imperialism and North-South flow of media products (Sinclair, 1996; Wilkinson, 1995).

Telenovelas' popularity has led to its increased scrutiny among scholars and the media industry, and yet it seems that not everyone is talking about the same thing. A number of arguments start with the contention that Latin American telenovela is a mere showcase for "bourgeois society" with the pernicious effect of mitigating – through the illusion of abundance – the unfulfilled material aspirations of its audience, all the while legitimating a way of life that takes consumerism to the extreme (Oliveira, 1993). From a less radical – but no less critical -- point of view, some scholars contend that despite the heavy dependence of Latin American television on corporate sponsorship, the telenovela has created the space for critical-realist dramas whose narratives [and controversial issues such as, for instance, women's liberation (Vink, 1988), political corruption (Porto, 1998; 2001) and homosexuality (La Pastina, 2002)] have called attention to actual conflicts and mobilized public opinion for social change. In other words: within certain limits, the telenovela is a vehicle of innovative, provocative and politically emancipatory popular culture rather than a mere instrument for the reproduction of capitalist ideology and consumer desires (Vink, 1988). Those are rather simplified extremes of the debates over telenovelas, but they illustrate well the lack of consensus among those who write about telenovelas. But, then, neither is there much consensus among those who write telenovelas themselves. Walter Durst, a Brazilian writer and director of telenovelas, has quite ironically stated that he was very jealous of those experts in the genre, for they all knew what telenovela was while he didn't (Fernandes, 1987, p. 19). To Vink, "this seems to be a basic problem with genres; everybody recognizes them, but defining them is something else" (Vink 1988, p. 165) .

The English language soaps in the United States, England and Australia have a well-developed research tradition (i.e.: Allen, 1985; 1995; 1996 ; Cantor and Pingree, 1983; Modleski 1982) . In the last few decades, in different parts of the world, the production of serialized television fiction has increased and so has the academic interest in its format and its role in society. Egypt developed its own local productions more than two decades ago, conquering local audiences and slowly increasing its penetration in the

Arabic-speaking regional market (Abu-Lughod, 1993 ; Diase, 1996). At the same time many nations, such as China (Chan, 1996) , India (Singhal et al. 1993) and Pakistan (Kothari, 1998) have increased production for their internal market, as well as for export. Similar to the Latin American model, these serialized programs in many other parts of the developing world have become central to the discussion of the nation.

Distinct from U.S. soap operas, Latin American telenovelas are broadcast daily in prime time. They "have very definitive endings that permit narrative closure," normally after 180 to 200 episodes depending on their popularity. They are designed to attract a wide viewing audience of men, women and children (Lopez, 1991 p. 600). Telenovelas' narratives are dominated by a leading couple, and rely on class conflict and the promotion of social mobility (Mazziotti, 1993). According to Aufderheide (1993), Latin American television can be rich in wit, social relevance and national cultural style. Recent Brazilian novelas dealt with bureaucratic corruption, single motherhood and the environment; class difference are foregrounded in Mexican novelas; and Cubans novelas are biting topical as well as ideologically correct (Aufderheide 1993, p. 583) .

In 1986, the Hollywood industry weekly *Variety* (Telenovela is ..., p. 15) defined the Latin American telenovela as a popular art form as distinctive and filled with conventions as the Western produced in the United States. The article reinforced the view that telenovelas and soap operas have common roots, but over time they have developed as clearly different genres. Within Latin American production centers, these distinctions have been emphasized, creating particularities in themes, narrative style and production values. For Lopez (1995), the Mexican telenovelas are the weepers, a-historical telenovelas with no context provided. Colombians are more comedic and ironic with a greater concern for context. Venezuelans are more emotional, but they do not have the "barroqueness" of Mexican sets. And Brazilians are the most realistic with historically based narratives that have a clear temporal and spatial contextualization. In a recent dissertation, Hernandez (2001) termed the classic Mexican style "bland" (blanda) and the classic Brazilian style "tough" (dura).

Recently, however, these divergences in style have been challenged by the increasing competition within the two largest markets, Brazil and Mexico, from upstart networks such as TV Azteca in Mexico and SBT in Brazil. Hernandez (Hernandez 2001) notes that new competing networks in the same country tend to adopt the style opposite to the leading network that they are trying to differentiate themselves from. So TV Azteca, located in the industrial north close to the border with the United States, has produced politically charged telenovelas with a contemporary bend to their narratives, challenging Televisa, Mexico's giant network (Hernandez and McAnany, 1997). Similarly in Brazil, the more weepy melodramatic Mexican telenovelas aired by SBT and CNT are upsetting Globo's dominance.

Independent of style differences, telenovelas are faithful to the melodramatic roots of the genre. Lopez (1995) argues that melodrama in Europe and the United States was discriminated against primarily due to its association with female audiences, while in Latin America, melodrama was devalued due to its class association that placed it in the realm of the popular. In this context of class identification, Lopez (1995) expresses how melodrama pertains to telenovelas:

The telenovela exploits personalization – the individualization of the social world – as an epistemology. It ceaselessly offers the audience dramas of recognition and re-cognition by locating social and political issues in personal and familial terms and thus making sense of an increasingly complex world (p. 258).

Mazziotti (1993), citing Gonzales, argues that telenovelas "allow for the viewers an emotional participation in a set of fictitious powers that play with elemental human questions: honor, goodness, love, badness, treason, life, death, virtue and sin, that in certain ways has something to do with the viewer" (p. 11).

The radio soap model was developed in the United States by corporations such as Colgate-Palmolive, Procter and Gamble and Gessy-Lever. Due to its success in reaching the female audience in the U.S., these corporations invested in introducing the soap genre into Latin American, starting in Cuba and soon spreading to the rest of the continent. But it was in Havana in the 1930s that the Latin American version of the radionovela began its transition. In the 1950s, Colgate and others similarly imported the television

soap opera into Cuba, where it was transformed into the telenovela. As first radio and then television novellas spread around Latin America in the next few decades, Cuba became the supplier of artists, technical personnel and, most importantly, the scripts for most of Latin America. This process accelerated after the 1959 Cuban revolution which closed down commercial media and led commercially minded producers to move to other Latin America countries, which commercial television industries were flourishing (Ortiz et al., 1988).

Traditionally seen as feminine text, telenovelas now attract males and females alike, of all ages and social classes. Throughout the years, it has provided both entertainment and information, and as a discursive practice and producer of cultural meanings it has been a major force in the production of images congruent with “the complex processes of Latin American modernization, nation-building, and increasing transnationalization” (Lopez, 1995, p. 257).

Telenovelas antecedents nevertheless go back further than the radio soaps to the French “vaudeville” theater and other forms of popular theater that relied on melodrama. (See the Santos article in this issue.) According to Martin Barbero (1993) they go back to “the forms and styles of entertainment in the popular fairs and in the oral story-telling traditions [of the 19th century] that emphasized fear, mystery and terror” which attracted a predominantly, if hardly wholly, illiterate audience (p. 112). The strong melodramatic flavor of the “vaudeville” theater eventually migrate to the press where performative strategies (mime, acrobatics, puppetry, and juggling) gave way to more overt dramatic narrative strategies borrowed from classic literature. Having entered a new stage, the genre gained an eminently literary aesthetic and demanded of the audience reading skills. For Martin-Barbero (1991), “it expanded the reading public and inaugurated a new relationship between popular readers and writing: that established by a story written in episodes and series” (p. 277). The “open structure” of the newspaper serial constitutes, still according to Martin-Barbero, “one of the key elements in today’s telenovela, “both in its configuration as a genre and in its widespread success” (Ibid.)

The European serialized newspaper novels arrived in Latin America (Argentina) in the form of serialized “gaucho-novels,” circulating mainly in loose-leaf pamphlets and weekly newspapers and, much later, through radio – where it regained dramatic force and reincorporated old theatrical conventions such as music and sound effects (Martin-Barbero, 1993, p. 113). By mid-1930s, we might say, the folletín (as the genre became known in LA) and the serialized “radio theater” or radionovelas existed side by side. El Derecho de Nacer (The Right to Be Born) inaugurated the genre in the language of radio, which would incorporate the oral tradition of songs, legends, scary stories, and tales of mystery found in Brazilian cordel literature, Mexican corridos, and Colombian vallenatos (Martin-Barbero, 1991, 278).

But even before the business of radio, cinema had already reinvented the genre, transforming it into a “magical show” to popular audiences; the silent films of Méliès (who owned and operated a “vaudeville” theater in Paris), Griffith, Chaplin and Keaton (both raised in “vaudeville” theater) been prime examples of this.

Although traditionally viewed and analyzed as quite different dramatic formats, the truth is that television melodrama learned much from film. As Martin-Barberto (1995) points out, The soap operas learned from the movies to use the melodrama to articulate any subject, no matter what it was: the connection of the national epic with private dramas, the displaying of eroticism under the pretext of condemning incest, the tearful dilution of tragic impulses, and the depoliticization of the contradictions of daily life (p. 279)

What is curious to notice here is that the movies to which Martin-Barbero refers were, in their most part, low-budget, “tacky” dramas of Mexican and Cuban origins, featuring families whose interactions produced stories of notorious complexity (see the countless obscure films given by Oroz, 1992). It is fair to say that the family melodrama, so dear to Latin American audiences since the 1930s, would gain its greatest popularity in both US television and film around the mid-1950s.

The new wave of melodramatic features and US television series which began in the 1950s did not exactly parallel the revolutionary wave that permeated Latin American cultural production at the time. The “art-as-weapon” type of thing was certainly neither a goal nor a desire of the US film and television

industries, though at time the conflicted relationship between the two had already resulted in corporate battles and bitter industrial warfare. But we should mention that, if only to illustrate the irony, as these industries began to carve out their separate content turf, they showed “a predisposition toward the same genre – the domestic family melodrama” (Leibman, p. 3). That is to say, both industries capitalized on the social currency of family life, making it the focal point of their narratives.

As consumer goods and television sponsors traveled down south from the mid-1950s forwards, the US television family melodrama, especially its soap opera version, became a genre to be adopted, if not largely adapted to the more tropical climates of Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico and Argentina. The result was a formal symbiosis (also discerned in the radionovelas and film melodramas produced in LA until then), the re-creation of the genre with very clear elements of (individual) Latin American cultures.

Suffice it to say here that both the US soap opera and the Latin American telenovela are essentially melodramatic narratives but, while based on the latter, the telenovela took a rhythm and style of its own. This is seen, for instance, in the fact that telenovela has always had clear-cut stories with definite endings that permit narrative closure (Allen, 1995; Lopez 1995). Furthermore, commercial sponsorship and patronage are no longer the sole realm of soap companies such as, for instance, Procter & Gamble, which still dedicate themselves to producing US daytime entertainment aimed at a largely female audience.

But while telenovela crosses national boundaries, and Latin American viewers pick and choose between Rio and Mexico City, glamour and down-to-earth ordinariness, fantasy and realism, it is becoming impossible to speak of the future of telenovela except as part of the wider future of the new information and entertainment systems as they become globally interconnected. In the last decade the Latin America telenovela producers have confronted the advent of new technologies, the increase liberation of governments and the opening of markets leading to both national and cross-national competition. The regional giants, Globo and Televisa, had to deal with a more dynamic and diverse market in which their voices did not totally dominate the spectrum anymore. These two networks which in each own particular way maintained a close relation to the dominant regime in Brazil and Mexico had to adapt to a democratic regime and a global economy (Sinclair, 1996).

What is the future of telenovelas? In the last few years many critics in Brazil claimed that telenovelas, as a genre was dying. The ratings were dropping and the narratives were seen as stale. Nevertheless, the telenovelas have regain its audience, have reinvigorated themselves readapting to current national dilemmas. It seems that the open nature of many telenovelas, at least as the genre seems to be progressing in most of Latin America creates the possibility to its continuous re-adaptation and integration within the urban landscape they have become symbolic of.

Scholars have looked at the history of the genre in different nations, the role of these narratives in different societies and communities with national contexts, and investigated the political economic structure of the industry and its relation to the presence of these narrative as viable commercial products. But where are we heading? Several conferences and some other research seems to indicate that there is clear interest and need to further investigate this phenomenon. It seems to us that there is a need to increase the transnational and transregional study of these serialized narratives to understand how different context have influenced narrative strategies and choices. But also how viewing communities have incorporated these narratives in their everyday life. Several projects in the past have attempted to gather comparative data but unfortunately the daunting dimension of such enterprise has hindered many of these initiatives.

Since the 1970s, with Miguel Sabido's project of pro-social telenovelas, many interventions and studies have been conducted considering the potential power these narratives might have in promoting social change (Nariman 1993, La Pastina, 2001; La Pastina, Patel, Schiavo, 2003). There are two distinct views on this project of telenovelas for social change. One that sees the need to intervention and production of narratives that are goal oriented and another that sees these entertaining narratives as tuned to the nations reality and invariably contributing to the promotion of social change. (Social change does not necessarily mean “positive” change since this necessarily implies a judgment call). Based on

many of the reception studies conducted in the last decade, telenovelas do seem to have a role in promoting awareness about different lifestyles (be it based on gender, age, geographic location) and potentially change among audiences.

It seems to us that the next decade will see attempts to integrate the knowledge about telenovelas in a macro context at the same time that more focused studies will contribute to a greater understanding of telenovelas relations to viewers. We certainly hope that this journal issue will generate many collaborative projects and a greater interest on telenovelas in Latin America and serialized fiction around the world.

## Endnotes

[1] See Rodriguez (1994; 1999), for a discussion of the construction of a panamerican audience; Wilkinson (1995), and Sinclair (1996), for an analysis of the Latin American cultural linguistic market; and La Pastina (1998) for the analysis of one specific case of a media product traveling within and between cultural linguistic markets.

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