

## MELODRAMA AND TELENVELA: HOW PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION SHAPE THE GENRE

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**Resumo:** Telenovelas são muito mais do que fórmulas repetidas infinitamente. Telenovelas são produtos culturais que reúnem estratégias de comunicação cuidadosamente elaboradas para envolver o público, para conduzi-lo a uma espécie de dramatização coletiva e para incorporar as reações da audiência. As telenovelas concretizam uma conexão entre produção e recepção que é extraordinariamente complexa.

**Palavras-chave:** telenovela, comunicação, melodrama.

This communication focuses on one main objective.

I intend to demonstrate that telenovela, as melodrama, is a genre that can't be properly characterized as simply a text or a TV program. What happens is that the production and the reception are both equally important elements. Telenovela activates a group of strategies carefully elaborated to produce one result: attract a massive audience.

I begin by establishing a relationship between telenovela and melodrama, to make clear the reason for the title of this communication:

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## TELENOVELA AND MELODRAMA

First of all, it is adequate to refer to telenovela assuming the close relationship between telenovela and melodrama. Telenovela is, indeed, the modern form and the most popular form that melodrama takes in many countries, and particularly in Brazil. Melodrama has had a long career in theatre, before coming to TV, where it seems to have found its perfect place, due either to the availability of technical resources that facilitate production of spectacles of great impact, or to the facility to reach huge audiences.

Traditionally melodrama is understood as a sentimental story targeted at the uneducated public.

Here, I'll demonstrate that telenovela, as a melodramatic specimen, is not a simple formula or a collection of neutral conventions addressed to less educated people. It is rather a complex TV program, inserted both in the melodramatic tradition and in the up to date communicational process.

- **tradition** - Melodrama/Telenovela must be thought within a traditional convention. As Barbero (1992) states, melodrama is a sum of tragedy, epic, comedy and terror tales all in the same spectacle. The main characters inherited from the original genres are the hero, the traitor, the victim and the fool, who are maintained in today's telenovelas, through numerous variations.

In this melodramatic tradition, spectacle is more important than verbal rhetoric. There are multi plots, strong and controversial feelings, all put together. In order to handle such multiplicity, verisimilitude is often sacrificed. So telenovelas introduce schematic solutions that invariably lead to the punishment of evil and reward of goodness, marriage being either the more visible reward deserved by good people or the best signal of happiness that the final solution ever provides.

- **modern communicational process** - melodrama/telenovela must be considered inside the contemporary reality of mass media. It is a narrative that is shaped while production and reception occur.

Let's examine now that communication process that occurs in telenovelas.

## TELENOVELA - THE WAY GENRE OPERATES

The main strategies that are implicated in telenovela's communication process are:

**I - telenovelas are meant to involve the public, rather than keeping them in the distance** in the sense that Brecht gave to the term. Resources telenovelas use to obtain that result are:

*I. 1 certain style of representing* - a convention considered realistic - in which the act of representation has been suppressed, has become invisible. TV technicians like dressers, make-up artists and set-builders are very preoccupied with achieving realistic effects. The fiction has to become similar to reality and provide the illusion of reality;

*I. 2 mixture of story time and actual time*, celebrating carnival, Christmas and other holidays, and introducing daily facts related to economic and social life;

*I. 3 presence of different kinds of characters*, strategically chosen to make identification easier. Among the 40 to 50 characters on average, 5 or 6 constitute the core group. These characters are expected to appear 60% of the entire time, because they absorb the public's biggest interest. The secondary characters have many functions, one of them being to provide identification to all segments of the audience. So they are created to represent, say, children, young and elder people, uneducated, with sophisticated interests, etc. Another function they have is to comment and abridge the story in order to allow people that are not watching TV all days to understand what is going on.

*I. 4 the privilege of omniscience* is generally offered to the public - according to Daniel Filho, one of the most important directors of Globo network, (2001). He states that it is the best way to satisfy the public. So, there are two solutions commonly present in the narratives:

- the public knows what characters don't know;
- the public and some characters know what other characters don't know.

*I. 5 presence of around 30% of external shots*, which function is to give more realism to the story and also to please the public with attractive cinematographic views.

## **II - telenovelas are either a story to be watched or talked to**

Related with the above described objective of involving the audience comes this second point: telenovelas need to be in the mind of spectators all day long. The purpose is to arouse such a strong interest that the spectator can't forget the story even while not watching it. To obtain this effect it is important that a telenovela can fuel the daily conversation, provoke polemics and debates, encourage gossip. This way the public will certainly watch the next chapter. The telenovela opens an intense speech in a sort of collective dramatization, as states Graziela Gomes (1998, p. 16-17), making a comparison with similar processes that occur in Brazil related to soccer, carnival and religious processions. Leonor Bassères, who belongs to the Globo scriptwriter team, is emphatic: "Nenhuma novela é sucesso sem torcida" (Almeida, 1995, p. 106). "No telenovela can be a success without cheering."

Strategies employed to increase audience's interest:

*II.1 provide newspapers and magazines with information* about the telenovelas, about the plot, the broadcasting, the cast, the writer, etc.; show the cast, and sometimes also the author, in real life situations or commenting on the novella, etc.;

*II.2 open spaces in other TV programs* to the cast and sometimes also the author, with the same intentions as described above;

*II.3 introduce product placement.* Besides being a way of making money, product placement can be an instrument to extend the importance of telenovelas to many fields of real life, making the public dream about, and hopefully, buy the same furniture and decoration, the same food and clothes that appear in the story.

*II. 4 divulge strongly the telenovela sound track,* to make the public sing the same songs that appear in the telenovela, and obviously buy the CDs.

*II. 5 deal with suspense.* Telenovelas work with suspense in a very inventive way.

Telenovelas are built with three kinds of segments: the weekly group of chapters; the daily chapter and the four inside chapter blocks. Each block inside a daily chapter must prepare the next one; each chapter must attract interest in the next chapter and each weekly block must attach itself to the next weekly block. Saturday nights - at the end of a week's block - are meant to provide the strongest hook in order to guarantee the audience for the next week.

Suspense can be built on the basis of an unresolved question (who has done it?) or anticipation (what will happen?). The cliffhanger can vary in intensity and importance: based on a crucial moment and also anticipating in rapid flashes scenes of the next episodes.

**III - telenovelas are stories to huge audiences.** As Daniel Filho states: "*if we are to produce a program to be broadcasted in the 9 p.m. timetable slot, the audience targeted is all.*" (Filho, 2001, p. 345). In earlier hours the public may be smaller and more specific, say, young people or housewives, but in any case the aim is at millions of spectators.

Strategies to reach the huge audiences:

*III.1 Use of different styles* when focusing on different segments of the population. The six o'clock novela, for instance, is very romantic- it shows young lovers struggling to overcome obstacles to their love before they get married. As soon as they are married the story is finished. At 7 p.m. the public is just reaching home from work and may be under stress, so humorous stories are more appropriate. At 8:30 p.m. the novela is more dramatic, often including a dose of humor and presents relationships between people after their marriage. The way to deal with different audiences is really important considering that when the earlier telenovela has been successful, it helps to assure the public to the next one.

*III. 2 Maintain a correspondence between the composition of characters and the audience.* In order to attract audiences of all classes, the social distribution of the telenovela's characters must express the social class distribution of telenovela's audiences. According to Sanches apud Hamburger (1999, p. 255) the proportion must be: 10% A class; 30% B; 40% C; 20% D. Among the classes, all the segments of the public - children, young, elder people - must appear, as we remarked before. Two more functions of the secondary characters appear now. One is assuring identification of all the segments of the audience. Another one is to provide the necessary dramatic relief that helps people to remain interested to the main story.

*III.3 Introduce the kind of subjects that interest people,* like it happened with divorce especially before the law was signed, or lately with sexual behavior, drugs, lost children, etc.

*III. 4 Maintain certain melodramatic conventions* known and recognized by the audience, because the recognition is in itself a pleasure.

III. 5 Change when the audience doesn't like what is presented. We can say that telenovela is open to be changed to fit audience preferences, although it was conceived before the beginning of the broadcast. It is as if a mother were telling a story to her kids and later accepting better solutions when realizing that hers weren't funny enough. It's impossible to foresee if a story will be or not well accepted, so the authors don't write many chapters in advance and remain attentive to change whatever is needed.

## CONCLUSION

This communication aimed to state that telenovelas aren't only a formula endlessly repeated. They are, rather, a group of strategies carefully activated in order to **involve the public**; to drive the public into a sort of **collective dramatization**, which result is the capture of huge **audiences**, the same audiences that, otherwise, have the power to force the story to change. The team of author, cast, directors, producers, etc. work with an obsessive objective in front of them: attract and maintain the largest possible audience.

Our analysis demonstrates that telenovelas belong to a sort of circle, because they are shaped inside a complex connection between production and reception.

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