

## The expansion of “the feminine” within the Brazilian public sphere: *telenovelas* of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the wide range of critical literature that, from a variety of theoretical perspectives and with an emphasis on different historical periods and countries, deals with the relationships between mass media and representations of gender relations. This review of the literature focuses on works that are particularly suggestive for our ensuing discussion on the major conventions of Brazilian telenovela, a television genre that blends elements of documentary and fiction and treats the nation in melodramatic terms. Analysis of relevant programs that were exhibited during the 70s and the 80s suggests that these soaps constructed the Brazilian public space in terms that expanded what the industry had conventionally defined as “woman’s domain”.

**Key words:** television; telenovelas; gender; nation.

In contemporary times, the paradoxical dynamics of local and transnational forces has led to the questioning and restructuring of conventional institutions such as nations, states, forms of government, family patterns and gender relations. Within this process, opposite tendencies co-exist in paradoxical ways. A tendency toward the homogenization and centralization of the global culture industry, for example, co-exists with opposing forces that affirm difference and subjectivities, promoting fragmentation. Gender, ethnic and racial identities subsist in a world in which the boundaries between the public and the private, the political and the personal, the masculine and the feminine are redefined, which also makes conventional disciplinary boundaries unsatisfactory.<sup>2</sup> Scholars in anthropology, sociology, literature, film studies, philosophy, gender studies, among other fields engage in various kinds of inquiries that seek to establish adequate tools to account for a panorama that is undergoing rapid transformation. Within this context, some

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<sup>1</sup>This text was presented as the Opening Conference for the First Brazilian Symposium on Gender and Media which took place in Curitiba in August of 2005. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of the event, both for the invitation and their initiative in promoting the event. The article elaborates on ideas and aspects I have presented in earlier works, and in particular, my book *O Brasil Antenado: A Sociedade da Novela* (Hamburger, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> In this case, culture, usually concentrated on the treatment of discrete issues, recognizes the confrontation entre transnational flows and persistent local identities, constructed through particular cultural idioms and takes on new controversial meanings. See, in this regard, works such as Marshall SAHLINS, 1995; Jean COMAROFF e John COMAROFF, 1992; Arjun APPADURAI, 1996.

topics appear recurrently, specifically related to the problematics of media representation. Among them, this paper deals with studies that discuss constructions of national representations, redefinitions of the boundaries between public and private, and the articulation of these problems with issues of race and gender.

The relations between gender and media constitute a problematic that sustains an extensive literature in a variety of languages, representing diverse theoretical perspectives and dealing with a wide range of media, such as film, television fiction and printed fiction. In Brazil, although the articulation between media –in particularly, *telenovelas* – and gender relations is present in early works, the topic has nonetheless been insufficiently studied in recent times. Therefore it is useful to go through a brief sketch of several critical works of feminist inspiration, beginning with the first studies done by Laura Mulvey, English film director and essayist, during the mid 1970s, and moving to more recent scholarship that from my point of view aids our reflections on the relations between media and gender relations in general, suggesting perspectives that are interesting for thinking about the Brazilian case. From there I will go on to considerations on the trajectory of Brazilian *telenovelas*, particularly during the 1970s and 80s, as a specific case of the expansion of the presence of the feminine in public space. Finally, I speculate on the contemporary situation s and the relationship between *telenovelas*<sup>3</sup>, as a proto-interactive genre, and reality shows.

## **1 Mass culture and gender.**

I look here at studies that can be located within different currents of critical thought, with varying degrees of refinement and theoretical solidity: from Andreas Huyssen's archeological study of the opposition between notions of mass culture and modernism in the 19th century, steeped in the German tradition, to works written at the "heat of the moment", a sort of field notes on media phenomena, such as those dealing with the death of princess Diana. In the case of the more recent studies on contemporary phenomena, their essayistic tone, permeated by personal impressions, is symptomatic of the times. Authors and works mentioned here are articulated in their relationship to issues that are brought out by the numerous studies on *telenovelas* in which I have been a participant over the last ten years, focusing on reception, textual analysis and the mapping out of processes of unequal interlocution that characterize the fabrication of this television genre. My choice of literature seeks to respond to the issues that empirical research has raised. It is not easy to express this dynamic of coming and going between theory and practice in research and criticism. Nonetheless, this will be precisely the effort I will make, beginning with my indication of which approaches I consider to be the most suggestive and those that did not figure as an *a priori* in my work but to which I arrived through the issues that emerged from the work itself and which, again, suggest the centrality of the relationship between gender and media.

I begin with Andréas Huyssen<sup>4</sup>, whose mapping of the ways in which the very notion of "mass culture" emerged as a construction with a specific gender is very suggestive. For Huyssen, the notion of mass culture emerges as feminine in a context in which the feminine is also associated with the private domain of

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<sup>3</sup> Telenovelas are daily prime time soaps, that in Brazil are broadcast six nights a week. Telenovelas have limited duration: each production lasts from six to eight months.

<sup>4</sup> HUYSEN, 1986.

the home and the supposedly emotional and uncontrollable female temperament. Mass culture is for Huysen the “other” in relation to which the project of modernist art can be understood. It is worth calling attention to the eloquence of Huysen’s interpretation, which uncovers the substance of two universes that are usually treated as different – and even opposing – precisely within this relationship of opposition that defines and constitutes both simultaneously.

Huysen’s historical and conceptual work, centered around the 19th century, shares the thesis of other authors who are dealt with further ahead who propose the hypothesis (very suggestive, in my view) that the public exhibition of these repertoires through communications media that go beyond the boundaries of the private domain may contribute to stimulating the ongoing redefinition of these notions – or more precisely, to the “expansion” of the universe conventionally defined as feminine. On the more contemporary plane, authors identify mass culture –television, soap operas, or in the Brazilian case, the *telenovela* – with the feminine world that is usually restricted to the private matters proper to the domestic sphere.

From different theoretical perspectives, authors such as Laura Mulvey, Tânia Modleski, Nancy Fraser and Miriam Hansen<sup>5</sup> characterize the relationship between different audio-visual media such as film and television and gender relations as a necessary dimension for the understanding of contemporary forms of conceiving social life, and particularly, the constitution of subjectivity. Some of these works show that by leaving gender out, modern definitions of the public sphere have eluded the underlying premise that the space of politics and work had been thought of as masculine, whereas the private space of the home – to which television belongs – was conceived of as feminine. Upon calling attention to the fact that gender differences are thought of as oppositions that are subordinate to the opposition between public and private spaces, this literature has contributed to calling these conceptual boundaries into question and beginning their re-definition.

The first feminist works on television emphasize the way in which programs destined to a female audience reproduce and reinforce notions of the public and the private that are associated with male and female domains. Laura Mulvey, English scholar and film maker and pioneer of feminist film theory, defined television as a privatizing force: while film encouraged the desire to leave the home and participate in public life, television provided incentive to stay home. For Mulvey, the expansion of television in post-war United States is associated with women’s return to the domestic space of the home. In this regard, women’s programs of the 1950s are understood as part of an effort to keep women confined to the private space of the home and to domestic and family responsibilities, while men continued to circulate in public space. Mulvey considers that television appropriated and encapsulated the redeeming potential of theater and of the French literary melodrama of the 19th century.<sup>6</sup> In her reading of television texts, Mulvey associated melodrama with the emergence of suburban America and with an emphasis on daily life oriented toward the family, thus

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<sup>5</sup> MULVEY, 1975 e 1986; MODLESKI, 1984 e 1986; FRASER, 1990; e HANSEN, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Melodrama in itself constitutes a vast field for research. For the purposes of our discussion here, it is enough to situate the debate and present a sketch of the major formal conventions of television melodrama, a set of characteristics that will serve our analysis of specific soap operas that I will go on to discuss in the second part of this text. For a synthesis of the different uses that are associated with the melodramatic mode, see Christine GLEDHILL, 1987; for a literary study that inspired feminist works, see Peter BROOKS, 1986; for a Brazilian debate on the realist or melodramatic lineage of soap operas, see Renato ORTIZ, 1987, and Renato ORTIZ et al., 1988; for a recent contribution that demonstrates the melodramatic structure of a mini-series, see Ismail XAVIER, 2003.

providing a guarantee for the reproduction of dominant bourgeois values. Mulvey's work remains a reference today, as it registers connections between audiovisual products and gender relations and thus revolutionizes the study of representation.

Tania Modleski, another feminist thinker, begins from the Gramscian legacy that seeks to detect instances of resistance in the moment of reception of media texts (a point to which we will return to below) and relates the American soap opera to the fragmented pace of domestic routine. She attempts to understand the nature of women's involvement with this most devalued of television genres whose audience is 90% female – associating the repetitive and slow character of its narrative to the dispersion that is characteristic of home routines. Modleski identifies a correspondence between the representation of the domestic sphere as it is inscribed in television soap operas and what she interprets as the experience of domestic routine. Going more deeply into the internal logic of the narrative and its reception, her work offers some suggestive clues for understanding the nature of viewers' relationship with the genre.

Recent feminist work emphasizes that, rather than reinforcing previously-defined oppositions and boundaries, mass culture and television melodrama in particular have played a role in diluting these imaginary boundaries and in disseminating issues that have been defined as public, political and masculine within the private, domestic, women's domain.<sup>7</sup> With this task at hand, such studies have shown how intrinsic and endogenous mechanisms of media production and reception can be thought of as forces for social change.

Lynne Joyrich<sup>8</sup> engages with Mulvey's approach to television melodrama. In her view, melodrama, television and consumerism are mutually reinforcing, yet television melodrama disseminates "feminine connotations" that "are diffused to a general audience, opening up contradictions (...) that invite further investigation" (p.229.) In other words, the difference between the targeted female audience, responsible for what the author has designated as the "women's connotations" of the program, and the wider public that accesses the repertory suggests an opportunity for studies that map interlocutions which do not necessarily unfold according as foreseen.

In her study of the representations that sprung up around television at the time it was introduced in the United States of the post-war period, Lynn Spigel – as Laura Mulvey before her – associates the diffusion of a new means of communication to the emergence of the suburbs outlying major urban areas. Yet for Spigel, rather than reinforcing women's confinement to the domestic sphere, television brought information on what was happening in the public sphere into the private and isolated suburban middle class space and to the women who spent long days in its exclusively residential neighborhoods, its deserted streets far from the bustle of the world.

From a different perspective, removed from but not alien to feminist problematics, Joshua Meyrowitz<sup>9</sup> suggests that television carries out a series of dislocations of repertoires - masculine and feminine, child and adult, public and private – in the shifting landscape of the United States of the 1950s. Meyerowitz uses an architectural metaphor to justify his argument. In his view, television breaks down the

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<sup>7</sup> In particular, see Lynn SPIGEL, 1992; Lynn SPIGEL and Denise MANN, 1992; and Lynne JOYRICH, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> JOYRICH, 1996, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> MEYROWITZ, 1984.

walls that separate the different rooms of a house. In this way it is also a medium that dislocates repertoires, bringing for example the masculine repertory of news reporting into women's home space, facilitating women's access to matters that were previously restricted to men and their specific space of work and leisure. Meyrowitz suggests that this generalized access to repertoires that had been more exclusive may explain unexpected changes in gender relations such as the emergence of the feminist movement or women's entrance into the labor force.

The author suggests the relevance of what could be described as "thematic dislocation". In other words, matters that were once confined to a specific group of persons, in specific situations, may through television escape the established hierarchies of institutions such as the church, school, the family and politics and now be accessed by all. Meyerowitz calls attention, for example, to the politization of the feminine universe that has occurred as a consequence of the domestic-sphere penetration of repertoires defined as masculine. It is also worth noting – and Joyrich's questioning moves in this direction – that television also promotes movement in the opposite direction, making neighborhood gossip available to all through the screen.

In this regard, Miriam Hansen's work on North American film and the inclusion of women in the public sphere in that country at the beginning of the 20th century is suggestive. Based on historical research, the author suggests that the unexpected presence of women in movie theaters led the industry to produce films whose narratives, costumes and stars sought to cater to women's expectations. In Brazil, the consolidation of the television industry took hold through programming centered around the telenovela, a genre that producers, advertisers and television viewers defined as feminine. The consolidation of the industry coincides historically with demographic changes such as women's entrance into the labor market, the drop in the average number of children per family and the rise in the number of divorces and rapid urbanization.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Brazilian television, the question is: how have *telenovelas* captured and expressed this process?

## **2 Television *telenovelas* in Brazil and the redefinition of the boundaries of public space.**

As I mentioned earlier, pioneering studies of telenovela reception examine the supposedly predominantly female nature of these programs. These studies were very bold for their time in the sense that they bring together both a reception studies approach and the gender dimension, two cutting-edge problematics of the decade of the 1980s. Through them, in particular as they are expressed in theses written by Sonia Pessoa de Barros Miceli, Ondina Fachel Leal, Jane Sarques and Rosane Manhães Prado,<sup>11</sup> we have been able to move ahead in our thinking about the gender dimension not as an *apriori* that would circumscribe the female audience as privileged interlocutor of these researchers, but as a notion to be problematized. This is what I will attempt to do below, seeking to show that *telenovelas* capture and express

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<sup>10</sup> For a synthesis of recent demographic changes, see Elza BERQUÓ, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> MICELI, 1974; LEAL, 1986; SARQUES, 1986; and PRADO, 1987.

this expansion of the feminine universe to the extent that they make inroads into the space – theoretically defined as masculine – of politics and news reporting.

“*Telenovelas* are for women”. This common sense notion functions over the various stages of production and reception of the genre, introduced into Brazilian television in 1951 as a fill-in that from 1970 until today – although perhaps with lesser repercussion - has come to head the list of the most popular programs. Within the context of commercial television, *telenovelas* constitute a cultural artifact that is capable of mobilizing a national audience. In fact, until the early 1990s, they averaged 50% of the audience, a figure which meant that around 50 million viewers watched the main *telenovela* simultaneously.

Market researchers responsible for carrying out audience and opinion polls claim that women make up the bulk of *telenovela* viewers. A variety of radio and television programs as well as magazines that specialize in the genre also define women as their target population. The largest of the latter, intitled *Contigo* (literally, “With You”) was developed with a female readership in mind. Literature on *telenovela* reception takes it for granted that women viewers are their privileged subjects. Data on audiences confirm that women constitute the majority of the soap-opera watching public and recent ethnographic work suggests that television viewers agree with this assertion.

Yet the widespread acceptance of this affirmation does not mean that *telenovelas* restrict themselves to those domains of life that the theories guiding culture industry production associate with women’s universe. It is precisely Brazilian *telenovelas*’ vocation to overstep the narrow boundaries of fictional television series made for women that makes the trajectory of these series throughout the history of Brazilian television a suggestive case for thinking about the role of media representation in the unusual networks of contemporary sociability, especially with regard to gender relations. *Telenovela* popularity today is taken for granted, as if it were to be expected that melodramatic feuilletons that had their origin in multinational corporations’ soap commercials would become part of a shared national repertory, that is, a space ruled by certain conventions established over time and related through forms and contents that are recognized by ample portions of the population as an arena where national representations are enacted. To interpret the phenomenon of the *telenovela* in Brazil means recognizing that, beyond the governmental, commercial and ideological projects that are involved, the genre has carved out meanings and directions that were unforeseen and unplanned.

From very early on, elements of Brazilian history and culture have been present in *telenovelas*, constituting the genre’s “local trademark” and notwithstanding the opposing tendencies represented by the conventions of international industry. Standing examples are the *telenovelas* written by veterans such as Ivani Ribeiro, Walter Durst and Benedito Ruy Barbosa, who have been active in the field since the 1960s.. During the 1970s, contemporary events - social and political, but also those related to fashion, manners and behavior - became preponderant elements of reference in dramas that presented the tensions of a country that saw itself as belonging to the future and seemed to believe that “its time had come”. Well-known *telenovelas* confirm the effort of authors engaged in extrapolating the limits of what they see as “dramalhão” (or exaggerated melodrama)<sup>12</sup> Without neglecting their melodramatic content, these *telenovelas* exaggerated

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<sup>12</sup> Brazilian idiom for “melodrama”.

their feuilletonistic vein, in other words, their intimate relationship with the extra-diegetic universe, the world outside their narrative. Such constant reference to contemporary temporality turned *telenovelas* into a privileged showcase for what it means to be “modern”, through a depoliticized and diluted version of that concept: as being in sync with contemporary behavior and fashion

The political and ideological content of *telenovelas* was an issue that marked the cultural debate of the 1970s and became the subject matter of numerous academic papers. Foreign works, as I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> read *telenovelas* from the perspective of “engaged professionals” and emphasize the possibility that they have to generate critical political ideology from inside the culture industry. Others emphasize the industrial and commercial character of the product in order to demonstrate that the critical intentions of engaged professionals are lacking in real concrete conditions for fulfillment. These authors emphasize the role of television serials in the reproduction of dominant ideologies and in the dissemination of consumerist fantasies. Recent work speculates on the immediate influence that *telenovelas* have on political behavior, such as election results.

The research that discusses the relationship that *telenovelas*, as women’s programs, have with the female public does not privilege the discussion of the political implications of gender. And works that deal with the political implications of *telenovelas* tend not to consider the implications of this television genre on gender relations. Yet as programs that during the 1970s and 1980s were geared toward middle class women – envisioned by the industry as ladies of domesticity, interested in romanticism and intimate plots, as opposed to men who were conceived as the privileged audience for documentaries and newscasts-, *telenovelas* overstepped these definitions, generating new parameters which in turn brought other issues to the forefront of debate. *Telenovelas* signalled a redefining of the boundaries separating men’s and women’s spheres, the political and the domestic, the public and the private, text and context, theory and practice.

During the 1970s and 1980s, *telenovelas* progressed from their previous identification as productions promoted by laundry detergent companies to their recognition as a legitimate space for interpreting and reinterpreting national identity, cast in terms of ideal types of family structure, (men, women, father, mother, husband and wife) This change is a consequence of the search carried out for a greater immediate relevance that could increase *telenovela*’s commercial value, to the extent that they would become a privileged space for advertising new products and for the pedagogical demonstration of new habits associated with “modern” life styles. This vocation for that which is current, as a showcase project, unfolded through an uncommon appropriation of elements of journalistic language. Mixing conventions of fiction with those of newsreporting, *telenovelas* continued to use references to national repertoires and inadvertently established a shared repertoire, a promiscuous virtual space whose verisimilitude depended on the appropriation and elaboration of elements of conjuncture and daily life – a convention that was inaugurated in the French feuilletons of the 19th century. This shared repertoire is also fruit of the ideological agenda of the professionals involved in the genre.

In their search for the immediate, *telenovelas* combined formal conventions from the repertory of television fiction made for women with those developed through newscasting and documentaries. This led to

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<sup>13</sup> Ver HAMBURGER, 2002.

a connection of the private sphere of domestic life and the public domain of politics, forging a strange sense of national community..

Several examples should help to provide concreteness to this argument. During the early 1970s, the allusions that were made to the country were carried out in terms that were scantily politicized. A sequence from a sports documentary that appears at the beginning of the telenovela *Irmãos Coragem* (1970, “The Courage Brothers”) situates the drama of a brother who leaves his native town, distant and anachronic yet familiar, to confront the glamorous, cosmopolitan world of the big city in time and in space. Spatially, it refers to Brazilian national territory, through the landscapes of the state of Minas Gerais as well as those of the metropolis; in time, it indicates that the narrative is concurrent with World Soccer Cup of 1970. Coincidence in time and space allow and reinforce the connection between the private drama of its characters and the potentially broad community of television viewers across the country.

Similarly, *Selva de Pedra* (1972, “Stone Jungle”) as the title suggests, defines the diegetic domain of the narrative as the domain of the city. Documentary shots of the city in its initial vignette - streets, sidewalks, cars, street lamps and buildings – allude to the anonymity of public life in major cities. Within this context, the conventional story of a man’s fall from innocence as he comes into contact with the frivolous yet glamorous world of his rich relatives, his wife’s revenge and the couple’s final reconciliation in classical melodramatic style (topped off with the news of the wife’s pregnancy), represents the dilemmas faced by migrants who during these years exchanged their rural habitat for an urban milieu. *Selva de Pedra* takes up the moral challenges of those who wish to maintain their family and community ties and at the same time climb the big city’s social ladder, an argument that is very similar to another soap, *Vale Tudo*, aired in 1988 – the year television censorship was ended – making open allusions to the nation.

Both telenovelas problematize the trajectory of characters who are natives of the metropolis, who for different reasons distanced themselves and then later came back to climb the social ladder. *Vale Tudo*’s intent to make statements about Brazil is emphasized in its opening vinhette, done as a montage, a style contrasting with its conventional and repetitive narrative of love and betrayal. Here, as in other telenovelas, aerial shots of specific landscapes mark narrative transitions, situating the drama in easily identifiable locales. This formal convention serves to realize television’s vocation for extending the viewers’s gaze to distant places, thus adding a touristic motif that consolidates landscapes from far-off places and associates them to different types of daily life conduct. But it also reinforces the sense of belonging to an imaginary community that becomes less abstract and more familiar through sharing not only the act of watching images and stories exhibited nationwide at the same time, but speculating on the characters’ motives and the possibilities for future plot developments.

*Roque Santeiro* (1985, “Roque, the Saint Maker”) is very explicitly a drama about a city that lives on lies. Its narrative appeals to well-known melodramatic artifices, such as false identities. But here, instead of the wife who pretends to be dead in order to escape her husband’s persecution, as in *Selva de Pedra*, we find a man who, considered to be dead, flees from his poor and isolated hometown with enough money to establish himself and see the world. Just like Simone, character from Janete Clair’s soap, the protagonist of this script written by Dias Gomes and Aguinaldo Silva hides his true identity, which in turn becomes the

pivotal resource behind the entire plot. Moral motives – the desire for revenge, in the case of the *Selva de Pedra* character, and blame, in Roque’s case – fuel the characters in both plots. The revelation of “true identity” unfolds slowly, offering material for daily episodes. In *Irmãos Coragem*, the issue of identity emerges in the literal split personality of its tormented protagonist, who appears successively as Lara, Diana and Márcia, all played by the actress Gloria Menezes. The character’s psychological personality split is solved in the end through surgical intervention, where the medical technological equipment of a surgery room takes center stage and the revelation of the psychic trauma Lara underwent in her childhood is made.

The oppositions that propel these narratives unfold around a major tension between “modernity” and “tradition”, organizing a contrast between metropolitan locations and small towns of the back country, groups of rich and poor characters, groups belonging to different generations and men and women around moral dilemmas. The good and the bad, honest and dishonest, sincere and untrustworthy, truthful and manipulative are engaged in the interaction that moves the narrative ahead.

In constructing “modern” universes that exist in opposition to “traditional” ones, these telenovelas allude to a persistent paradigm for representing Brazil as a “nation of the future”, which in some sense served as a reference for both communists and military regime, forces of Left and Right during the 1950s and 60s. The movement toward the modern is seen as necessary and almost inexorable, although it is also imbued with mixed signals. The content of this “development” varies. These telenovelas capture and express the ideological universe within which diverse political forces and cultural movements have positioned themselves, delving into political themes through a melodramatic language, dealing with “tradition” and “modernity” in terms of consumer goods, means of transportation and communication and behavioral patterns, sexuality, gender relations and family structure. This is how telenovelas come to occupy portions of public space, a peculiar public space that is characteristically saturated by a combination of intimate matters, consumerism and nationality.

*Roque Santeiro* and *Vale tudo* are among the list of telenovelas that have had greatest public repercussion. Although coverage of these *telenovelas* has been confined to the cultural sections of newspapers, this has nonetheless moved beyond the scope of sections that specialize in television. Both have reached segments of viewers who do not usually watch this type of program. *Roque Santeiro* had a similar impact in other Latin American countries. *Roque Santeiro* and *Vale Tudo* may be considered at the same time as apex and turning point in the trajectory of telenovelas, marking the beginning of a disarticulation of the conventions that marked the genre over the preceding period. While *Roque Santeiro* emphasized the survival of traditional Brazilian *coronelista* practices with irony and cynicism, *Vale Tudo* called attention to the unintended consequences of modernization within urban cenários. *Irmãos Coragem* and *Selva de Pedra* drew attention to the perverse persistence of anachronism. Similarly to other titles pertaining to the latter part of the decade of the 1980s, such as *Roda de Fogo* (“Wheel of Fire”) and *O Salvador da Pátria* (Savior of the Fatherland) by screenwriter Lauro César Muniz, these telenovelas became the first public space of the New Republic to problematize corruption, a topic that was to dominate the agenda of the first direct presidential elections of the post-military regime republic, and that set the political agenda of the early 1990s, culminating in President Fernando Collor de Mello’s impeachment. Unfortunately, corruption has

embarrassingly continued to occupy this position as a prime issue on the order of the day. And it is worthy to note that corruption may very well have become endemic, bringing a narrative structure to institutional politics that is close to that of the telenovela or perhaps even more pertinently, a genre to which it is related, the reality show.

With the broadcasting of *Irmãos Coragem*, the major television network *Rede Globo*'s prime time (eight o'clock) *telenovela* moved to the top of the list of most popular television programs. *Irmãos Coragem* is also mentioned in the literature as a telenovela that attracted a significant male audience. The supposedly "Western" style of the narrative that was used in publicizing the soap was reported by the network's research department as a justification for the success it had among male viewers.<sup>14</sup> Its allusion to daily life, contemporary affairs and elements of culture that are national in scope, a recurrent convention in the *Rede Globo* network's eight o'clock telenovelas since 1969, offers a suggestive explanation for the fact that these soaps were able to reach out to such a wide variety of viewers.

*Irmãos Coragem* makes reference to soccer and to the tension between the rural environment of the small town and the metropolitan environment of the big city. This legendary telenovela opposes models of women who take initiative, yet continue to be submissive, to women who are liberated but perverted. Unlike *Irmãos Coragem*, *Selva de Pedra* portrays women who are independent and professionally successful. In both telenovelas, sex and marriage are linked to procreation, a connection that loosens in the telenovelas that follow, accompanying changes in customs revealed through widely commented demographic tendencies.

Analyzing several telenovelas in perspective, parallel to their allusions to social and political processes, it becomes possible to detect a trajectory of growing liberalization of women's roles. Over the years, female *telenovela* characters evolve from women "made for marriage" and potential mothers to women who are determined to make their own way. The female protagonists of *Irmãos Coragem* became wives and mothers. The one exception, Potira, left her marriage to seek fulfillment in love with a stepbrother, but was punished with death. *Selva de Pedra* introduces a protagonist who achieves professional fulfillment independently – and perhaps because far away – from her husband. It is worth noting that her profession belongs to a domain generally associated with women, that of the arts, and the telenovela does not problematize the relations between marriage, maternity and work. In *Os Gigantes* ("The Giants"), the protagonist, who had opted for professional fulfillment as a foreign correspondent in detriment of family, is in the end forced back by family circumstances. Her capitulation in the face of the need to manage family patrimony and generate an heir leads to her final madness and death. *Roque Santeiro* introduced the paradigmatic figure Porcina, determined, extravagant, and free in love. In *Vale Tudo* there is a range of different possibilities for women. Some work in glamorous professions such as fashion, direct business firms or construct professional independence based on a highly feminized knowledge, that of culinary arts. Others initiate a career later in life, after separation.

Problems related to women's role in society, in the family and at work constitute a privileged source of themes that are considered "provocative". Over the course of these years, second marriages, sex outside of marriage or unconnected to procreation become common in telenovela repertory. Although the content of this

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, ORTIZ et al., 1988, p. 101.

liberalizing trajectory may be associated with the ideas promoted by the feminist movement, it can hardly be classified as “feminist”. The word “feminist” does not appear within the text of the telenovelas or within television viewers’ comments. Although the term “*machista*” is mentioned in connection with telenovelas within the context of reception studies and discussion group reports -in conjunction with negative characterizations of jealous or controlling men - the women who oppose such behavior are referred to simply as “strong”. This is not just a matter of nomenclature. The treatment that telenovelas give to gender relations suggests the widening of the spectrum of possibilities for women, and in a certain sense, the atrophy of possibilities available to men, yet there is no problematization of gender relations properly speaking. . The distribution of domestic chores and those related to childrearing, for example, a delicate topic in the universe of gender relations, is not dealt with within these telenovelas. Within the world of televised fiction, the expansion of female domains includes growing appreciation for womens’ labor market participation, yet the greatest emphasis is placed on the widening of that which is considered morally permissible. Telenovelas legitimate the separation of women who are unhappy in their marriages and their further romantic involvement.

Reception studies suggest that positively valued female characters are those that cry little and confront adversity with grace. Female characters frequently undergo *transformation* over the course of the story, and it may be accurate to say that telenovela mobilizes fans around the metamorphosis of characters. Some of them begin the telenovela as dependent women, such as actress Regina Duarte’s character Rachel in *Vale Tudo*, who undergoes a series of trials and tribulations: ill treatment at the hands of a husband who drinks too much, is absent and a poor provider, separation, return to her father’s house in the town of Iguaçú with daughter in tow, to the “turn” that takes place when she becomes a tourist guide, her father’s death, her daughter’s betrayal (she proceeds to run off with the money from the sale of their home), arrival in Rio de Janeiro in search of the daughter where she becomes a beachside sandwich vendor, her ex-husband’s death, amorous troubles, unredeemed daughter, the imprisonment of her partner who in a moment of weakness betrayed her, her forgiveness and pledge to wait for him – all leading up to a triumphant happy ending showing her happily devoted to raising her grandson. The character’s trajectory involves a tale of social climbing that is based on her own talent and resourcefulness. Her *transformation* from fragile, suffering housewife to strong, successful entrepreneur is expressed in her change in wardrobe, in the scenarios within which she lives and works, and the romantic harmony of the ending.

The reward of her success in almost all realms of existence – with the exception of motherhood, although this is made up for by the full exercise of her role as grandmother, since she acquires the legal right to raise her unrehabilitated daughter’s son - is presented as the exclusive merit of her good nature and perseverance. The gains are moral, and the obstacles that must be overturned – such as her first husband’s failure and the machinations of the story’s villains – are also located within the realm of the moral. There is no real gender discrimination to be confronted. The “strong” and “liberated” woman of the telenovela does not demand equal conditions, wages or quotas. Laws, actions and special police divisions that cater to women’s needs do not appear. The exploitation of bodies in that sort of “anything goes” that *Vale Tudo*

(“Anything Goes”) deals with is presented as an effective strategy both for female and male bodies. The figure of the *gigolo* in the character César (Carlos Alberto Ricelli) makes this clear

*Telenovelas* and serials such as *Malu Mulher* achieved success associating women’s liberation with a certain notion of female “strength”, as women free themselves from exclusive dependence on men. Situated within the depoliticized universe of domestic matters, the trajectory of liberalization became possible during and in spite of the strong censorship imposed by the military regime. Since it hardly unsettles gender relations per sé, the telenovela provides legitimacy for the *superwoman* model: she who accumulates both the traditional functions of wife and mother and those of provider. This is a result that in many ways can be considered perverse.

It is striking that telenovelas’ portrayal of a Brazil that is much whiter and much richer than it really is was understood as a verisimilar portrait of an unequal country whose population is largely of color or mixed-race. It is possible that this verisimilitude has to do with a coherence that is constructed not around the illusion of spectacular representation but around the allusion to different elements of the conjuncture, from fashion to politics, as references to the extra-diegetic universe that sustain the verisimilitude of the plot.

The peak of references to Brazil may very well be in the year 1990, when another major network, *Rede Manchete* aired *Pantanal*, a telenovela that reverberated and hit high ratings during evening hours after the customary “eight o’ clock soap”. It is significant that the network’s feat involved the telenovela *Pantanal* which presented an alternative view of the country that also made use of alternative formal conventions. *Pantanal* provided a visual alternative to perturbed urban scenes. It appealed to a search for roots “in the heart of Brazil”, in the exotic landscapes of the back country. Long takes of rural landscapes with clear and unpolluted water and dense vegetation gesture toward the possibility of redemption from the harsh urban environment of the large metropolis. The bucolic scenery is curiously associated with female nudity and the recomposition of the family around the figure of the patriarch and his sons.

### **3 From the 1990s on: diversifying the Brazilian television industry.**

*Pantanal* marks the end of an era. During the 1990s, thematic and formal conventions diversified. References which during many years consolidated the telenovela as a showcase of fashion, news and behavior assumed the explicit role of intervention in telenovelas that took on the character of constructions of representation; or, better put, that revealed, at least partially, the mechanisms behind the construction of representation and gave telenovelas themselves the status of initiating polemics. Mothers of missing children actually recovered their children thanks to campaigns carried out within the telenovela *Explode Coração* (which could be translated roughly as “Bursting Heart”) The exhibition of missing children’s images led television viewers to get in touch with the broadcaster with clues as to the whereabouts of some of these children. The broadcaster, in turn, followed through on the cases, acting as a more efficient intermediary than the police or the judiciary. This social action was well-capitalized on through its dissemination in news broadcasts that followed through on the evolution of these searches and their outcomes, as supplementary

chapters of the telenovelas - digressions in which the theme of identity revelation remains on the agenda. Another case of intervention, this time within the political arena, was due to the visibility that the telenovela *O Rei do Gado* (literally, “The Cattle King”) gave to landless rural workers. More recently, *O Clone* (“The Clone”) intervened around the issue of drugs, legitimating the issue of their de-criminalization.

The reality shows that following a worldwide tendency gradually won ground in Brazil during the 1990s radicalized these tendencies that were already present in telenovelas. The reality show may be understood as an outgrowth of the telenovela, a sort of “telenovela without a script”, a game that thrives on the most banal of intrigues, a narrative that establishes itself, at least in its most consolidated Brazilian version, through its editing.

The first program of this genre in Brazil appraised the around-the-clock daily life of young actors and actresses who were at the start of their careers or whose careers had for some reason suffered setbacks. Successive versions gesture toward the possibility of fame and success in an acting career. The futility of everyday relations are the theme of each daily chapter. Basic rules on the “elimination” of participants guarantee a device that propels the plot according to the combination of participants’ and viewers’ votes.

Radicalizing the mechanisms of distorted mediation present in telenovelas, reality shows indicate the more explicit constitution of networks. In the first version of the reality show *Casa dos Artistas* - perhaps the most successful of its type - the interaction of gymkhana participants within the house was made available to television viewers via satellite transmission in real time, live and unedited. An edited chapter with the best moments of the day went on air during prime time. Each Sunday the network was further widened through “elimination” sessions conducted live by television host Silvio Santos, who mediated the relationship of the actors in the house, those watching his show and home viewers. Widening the scope of his network, Santos commented on news from the press and at times carried on a live dialog with his colleague at network headquarters. From one broadcaster to another.

In conclusion, *telenovelas*, understood as “proto-interactive” programs that presuppose unequal and distorted mediation processes - a synergy in which the representation of gender relations play a preponderant role, as an intrinsic part of a broader process of the expansion of a universe conventionally defined as feminine- may be seen to anticipate the media phenomena that mark contemporary societies.

A special issue of the journal *Screen* which was devoted to analysis of the media dimensions of manifestations that unfolded in relation to the death of Princess Diana offers several suggestive texts that corroborate our observations on telenovelas and the earlier mentioned analyses of the role of media. The essays suggest elements such as interactivity, connection and live performance as keys to understanding the compulsion that pushed hordes of British citizens out into the streets to manifest their sorrow over the princesses’ death.

In her article, the volume’s editor, Christine Geraghty, begins from the idea suggested by literature of feminist inspiration that *telenovelas*, in the words of the author, “Most crucially reversed traditional values by privileging the feminine world in which emotion, empathy and talk were the means by which life could best be understood and managed”<sup>15</sup> She goes on to observe that Diana had been shocking because of her

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<sup>15</sup> GERAGHTY et al., 1998, p. 71.

novelesque mobilization of personal narrative within public space. Geraghty specifically cites the famous interview that Diana conceded on Panorama, a prestigious British television program. In this interview the princess, invested with functions of representing the United Kingdom, used the space customarily devoted to political and social issues to speak of her personal life, in terms which mobilized the language of romance.

The author observes that, during most of her married life, “Diana was literally speechless: it was clearly her person, her body, which was the news.”<sup>16</sup> In breaking through her muteness, Diana also breaks with other conventions. Her interview in Panorama is for Geraghty a privileged example of how the media have a peculiar way of synthesizing political and personal, public and private subjective experiences. The impact and fascination that Diana provoked could thus be seen as related not to the specific contents of her speech but to the dislocations of repertoires that it carried out bringing elements of her private life into the political arena, elements related to romance and betrayal, thematic dislocation along the line of what authors mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, such as Andreas Huyssen and Joshua Meyrowitz suggest.

In some regard, the dislocation of repertoires operated by Diana and expressed in Panorama may help to explain the collective mobilization that her death unleashed, with thousands of participants making a point – perhaps a bit like Diana herself had done – of demonstrating their involvement through their physical presence, justified as a way of experiencing her wake and funeral in their totality. Once again, “television offered a better view, but not the smell of flowers, the touch of the crowds”.<sup>17</sup>

The author makes the ironic observation that participants used microphones and television polls to communicate to those who were not there what it was that they were missing out on, thus emphasizing the insistent relevance of physical presence, of live witness and of real experience that no virtual spectacle is capable of substituting. In a way that is similar to Geraghty, Roger Silverstone, another one of the writers included in this special issue of *Screen* magazine,<sup>18</sup> attempts to understand why in the end thousands of people flowed out onto the streets to manifest their solidarity with a celebrity who had been deposed of institutional power, with no constituted leadership or defined cause. For Silverstone, it was the desire to participate that propelled people onto the streets. And in his view, this sense of participation had, to some extent, to do with what he calls an “epistemological rupture”. In other words, upon abandoning the position of spectator, people who went out onto the streets left the realm of representation in order to move into the realm of experience itself.

Silverstone is interested in what he has termed *appropriation of media space*. His approach is interesting, since he is not satisfied with a simplistic solution like those that eliminate distinctions between reality and fantasy, true and false, fact and fiction. For Silverstone, the absence of these distinctions would degrade experience. If we no longer differentiate fact and fiction, experience becomes exactly the same as non-experience. Yet the events surrounding Diana’s death suggest that experience has maintained its appeal. The phenomenon that was created around her death leads these authors to rethink relations between subject and object, broadcaster and receiver. Eagerness to participate, to abandon the mere position of receiver,

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<sup>16</sup> GERAGHTY et al., 1998, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> GERAGHTY et al., 1998, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> GERAGHTY et al., 1998.

propelled people outside their homes, into public space, where they could be captured by television cameras. This generalized predisposition for performance raises questions about existing conceptual models.

Interaction, connection, live collective performance, participation, appropriation, emotion, empathy, and romance are all elements that Geraghty and Silverstone bring out regarding the manifestations of sorrow that followed the princesses' death. These are elements that come close to what Brecht identified as classic theater (in opposition to its epic versions).<sup>19</sup> These are elements that Adorno has described as intrinsic tools of the culture industry, mechanisms employed to guarantee and sustain the alienation that it perpetuates. These are elements that in Andreas Huyssen's archeology appear linked to the feminine universe of mass culture. These same elements reappear now as elements of people's – men and women, politicians and characters – involvement with the media.

The current state of research demands an approach that incorporates the endogenous logic that reigns within the media as well as the ways in which it is situated in relation to economic and social powers and other dimensions of life. The desire for direct participation, performance and interaction, that *utopia of immediate communication* that Spigel describes, or the *effort to problematize everyday experience*, as Marlyse Meyer<sup>20</sup> phrases the problem in her book on the feuilleton, constitute useful notions for our understanding of the fascination that the telenovela exerted over the 20 years that marked its golden age. These notions also offer clues that may help us come to grips with the global appeal that television reality-shows have today. This is the issue of immediate connection, which incorporates the public and breaks, to a certain extent, with the stagnant relationship between those on the stage and those in the audience, author and work, exhibition and reception, suggesting the desire for networking.

Programs that offer ordinary citizens the possibility to participate in the world of spectacle as long as they are willing to share their harshest personal stories contribute to spreading the melodramatic narrative over the widest range of spheres of social life. We need to research formats and means that go beyond these registers. Television and diverse media vehicles cater to people's desire for relations without intermediaries. Television and much more radically, the Internet offer means for social integration – or desintegration, as Virilio<sup>21</sup> would have it – that sidestep traditional mediating institutions.

This vocation to stimulate the desire for participation is related to the formal technical apparatus of the electronic medium, with the formal connections and messages incorporated into the texts and the particular ways in which this medium captures and expresses conjunctural events and debates at particular moments in time and space. Over time, television viewers and producers have come to agree on certain conceptions and formats. They share some definitions which become almost natural.

In Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s, telenovelas had a very similar role. Television viewers of all social classes, men and women of the most varied age groups, inhabitants of the diverse geographical regions reached by television broadcasting watched the serials. Male and female television viewers speculated on the unfolding of the storyline; they knew that every evening at a certain time, new episodes would be aired. Over the years, the cast, as well as the formal conventions of a genre that evolved according to what

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<sup>19</sup> Ver Walter BENJAMIN, 1985, p. 147-154.

<sup>20</sup> MEYER, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Paul VIRILIO, 1984.

producers imagined the expectations of viewers would be, became recognized as elements of a repertory shared by spectators living all over the Brazil, belonging to a wide range of social segments and age groups, men and women, people with different sexual orientations. Producers created certain mechanisms to measure television viewers' opinions on their favorite serials. Television viewers also thought up their own mechanisms for participating in this proto-interactive dynamic. *Telenovelas* became a prevailing lexicon for national public communication.

In some regard, in watching and commenting on the unfolding plots of telenovelas, people are able to develop mediations between their experiences in public and private life. It is as if *telenovelas* offer a repertory that makes it possible to associate domestic dramas, such as violent passions, and social behavior that is considered more or less legitimate.

Over the course of the years, *telenovelas* have captured and expressed a certain expansion of the universe that is conventionally defined as feminine. This expansion indicates an increase in and diversification of possibilities for women. Recently, examples of plots that legitimate homosexual relationships corroborate this movement, suggesting that the stretching of boundaries continues. This expansion of what is considered legitimate within a space conventionally defined as feminine meshes with the mechanisms that the different authors that I have referred to throughout this presentation discuss, as they accompany the eruption of analogous mechanisms in other parts of the globe. We should however remember that this expansion also captures and expresses the perverse elements of this widening of possibilities, to the extent that conflicts related to gender discrimination have remained relatively unproblematicized.

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