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

Latin Americans tune in their television sets to watch telenovelas

- For more than thirty years now telenovelas have dominated prime time programming on most of the region’s television.
- 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, and Canada.

Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

- 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.
- This international presence has challenged the traditional debate of cultural imperialism and North-South flow of media products.
Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

(As 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.

Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

(Also have) created the space for critical-realistic dramas whose narratives and controversial issues such as, for instance, women’s liberation... political corruption... and homosexuality have called attention to actual conflicts and mobilized public opinion for social change.

Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

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.
Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

- 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.

Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

- Telenovelas' narratives are dominated by a leading couple, and rely on class conflict and the promotion of social mobility. Recent Brazilian novelas dealt with bureaucratic corruption, single motherhood and the environment; class difference are foregrounded in Mexican novelas; and Cuban novelas are bitingly topical as well as ideologically correct.

Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

- 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. Brazilians are the most realistic with historically based narratives that have a clear temporal and spatial contextualization.
Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

- Divergences in style have been challenged by the increasing competition within the two largest markets, Brazil and Mexico:
  - 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
  - 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.
  - Similarly in Brazil, the more weepy melodramatic Mexican telenovelas aired by SBT and CNT are upsetting Globo’s dominance.

Telenovelas: Characteristics & Audience

- The telenovela exploits personalization
  - It ceaselessly offers the audience dramas of recognition and re-recognition by locating social and political issues in personal and familial terms and thus making sense of an increasingly complex world

Telenovelas: Origins

- 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.
    - 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.
Telenovelas: Future

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.

Telenovelas: Future

Studies have been conducted considering the potential power these narratives might have in promoting social change.

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

– Another that sees these entertaining narratives as tuned to the nation’s reality and invariably contributing to the promotion of social change.

Telenovelas: Future

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.