

## **A Kiss Is (*Not*) Just a Kiss: Heterodeterminism, Homosexuality, and TV Globo Telenovelas**

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This article addresses the inherent bias in Brazilian telenovelas' representations of homosexual love. Medium- and genre-specific biases such as the visibility of telenovelas are powerful limiting agents of representation. However, technological determinism must be expanded to read culture itself as deterministic to properly account for particular biases in the medium's use in different national contexts. The key issue is a struggle for a "monopoly of knowledge" over discourses that deem homosexuality as "acceptable," and one that views it as "unacceptable" and strange. This article examines three recent gay and lesbian progressive storylines in TV Globo telenovelas that fell short in one important aspect: the characters were not allowed to kiss.

This article addresses the inherent bias of the Brazilian television medium—more specifically, TV Globo's *telenovela* genre—as it relates to representations of homosexuality and homosexual love. Medium- and genre-specific biases—for example, the "visuality" (itself an example of the codes) of telenovelas—are powerful limiting agents of representational possibility. This article argues, however, that technological determinism must be expanded to read culture itself as "deterministic" to properly account for the particular biases in the use of the medium of TV in different national contexts. The key issue is a struggle over what Innis (1951) described as a "monopoly of knowledge" over the discourses that deem homosexuality as "acceptable," as some writers of telenovelas propose, and one that views it as "unacceptable" and strange—namely, the Brazilian culture at large, with its strong Roman Catholic heritage and growing evangelical population. This article examines three recent gay and lesbian progressive storylines of TV Globo telenovelas that fell short in one important aspect: the characters were not allowed to kiss on-screen.

The representation of homosexuals and homosexual love in Brazilian telenovelas (and more specifically TV Globo's) is an essential aspect of social equality because of the programs' important cultural role and cachet. Unlike U.S. soaps, telenovelas are not purely melodramas and are still alive and well. They are central to the everyday life of most Latin Americans. Storylines comment directly on current events, and people are glued to the set across social classes. Audiences include many men as well as women, and the programs are broadcast in prime time, not daytime. Another specific characteristic of telenovelas is their format: they last an average of just nine months and are directed to a happy ending

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that is immediately followed by the beginning of another telenovela. The audience knows and expects this. The ending, always happy, must be considered an integral part of the genre in Brazil, a rule of the game (Costa, 2001; Downing, 2002; Klagsbrunn, 1993; Mattos, 2004). But most importantly, although telenovelas are a successful form of entertainment, they are also an important forum for bringing social and political issues to the forefront of public debate (Hamburger, 1999; La Pastina, 1999, 2002; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990). Therefore the ways in which homosexuals and, more specifically, homosexual love are represented are particularly pertinent to media studies research and to the GLBTQ movement.

Another essential feature of the Brazilian telenovela is that it is defined as an “open text” or “open art form.” Because the story is written at the same time each chapter is aired, the writers can take the public’s reactions to the telenovelas into account in the episodes to come.<sup>1</sup> This integration between the writers and the public characterizes the telenovelas as an open art form. To channel this extensive viewer participation (with the aim of maintaining a high audience share), TV Globo constantly conducts surveys and focus groups to ensure that viewers are happy with stories and plotlines (Fernandes, 1997; Joyce, 2012; Klagsbrunn, 1993; La Pastina, 2002; Mattos, 2002).

In addition, telenovelas (especially TV Globo’s) are the most popular television programs in Brazil and are exported to more than 140 countries worldwide (Telles, 2004). Seeing themselves mirrored on the television set, Brazilians use the characters and their actions as guidelines for their own personal problems and aspirations (Telles, 2004; Tufte, 1993; Valladares, 2005). The programs bring political events, news, and trends to the fore, as well as questions about ingrained traditions such as gender roles and sexuality. They therefore function as a type of public sphere (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

The programs’ immense popularity means “the social roles of men and women often end up dictated by the same stories that seem to merely represent them” (Costa, 2000, p. 11). Their portrayal—or lack thereof—of homosexuals and homosexual love is thus highly significant, as the genre contributes to the general cultural acceptance of issues and in so doing can open up real-life possibilities to a segment of the population that traditionally faces discrimination.

This research is designed to demonstrate how some Brazilian telenovela writers use the narratives and popularity of telenovelas as a public sphere for social change by introducing topics for discussion and debate and attempting to destabilize the monopoly of knowledge held by the Church and Latin American culture of machismo, which deems homosexuality sinful, wrong, unacceptable, and strange. While important limitations are imposed by other aspects of the telenovela—ratings, official and nonofficial censorship, advertising pressure, and so forth (Joyce, 2012; La Pastina, 2002; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990)—I argue that they all share the common overarching heterodeterministic cultural background and bias.

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<sup>1</sup> Although traditionally the taping of a telenovela starts 2–3 months before its scheduled debut, this gap tends to shrink considerably once the program is broadcast. Having episodes “on the shelf and ready to go” gives the writer and production team breathing room and also allows last-minute changes to the script.

Though this is not a reception study, this analysis of the representation of a few recent gay or lesbian characters in TV Globo's prime-time<sup>2</sup> telenovelas—all of them lacking the most basic expression of romantic love, a kiss—explores how the content of telenovelas can ultimately suggest changes in social attitudes and behaviors associated with gender relations and sexuality, or at least bring a debate to the fore. Additionally, by focusing on the "kiss-less" representation of gay and lesbian characters I aim to show that the real bias is not in the television medium itself but in culture, and thereby highlight the struggle over the monopoly of knowledge taking place in a mediated arena: television, and more specifically TV Globo's telenovelas.

The present research thus adds another layer to the discussion of culturally oriented alternatives to technological determinism and the social shaping of technology. Akin to Raymond Williams' (1975) study, it investigates some of the relationships between TV as a technology and TV as a cultural form. Like Williams, I acknowledge that television programming is somewhat determined by television's technological character, but I also assign importance to the cultural assumptions and discussions concerning appropriate use of this "mass" medium to influence consumers and producers.

Additionally, my investigation of the kiss-less representation of homoerotic love in TV Globo's prime-time telenovelas takes into consideration Raymond Williams' (1975) "programming flow," which shows how commercial and informational elements are interwoven. Whereas Williams demonstrated that to watch the international news brought to us by a specific brand of toothpaste is not to see separate elements but the shape of a dominant cultural form (1975, pp. 78–118), I show that the fight for ratings and the consequent advertising revenue are decisive factors in the type of homosexual representation currently available in Brazil.

Key to my research is unveiling the multiple meanings of homosexuality that might be generated by its representation—or lack of representation—in the medium. I locate TV, and telenovelas more specifically, as a site of struggle over meanings and of mediations à la Martín-Barbero (1987), shifting the focus from technology itself (media) to mediations. Like Raymond Williams (1975), Martín-Barbero (1987) is critical of the genre and recognizes the telenovela's commercial nature: "within its openness and confusion lies a commercial logic" (p. 228). However, he also warns that "to reduce this crossroads of different logics to a question of marketing and to deny the existence of other cultural experiences of matrices is methodologically incorrect and politically flawed" (p. 228). Thus, my research is also similar to Martín-Barbero's as we both locate the telenovela as a place of negotiation, reconfiguration, and mediation of popular culture and identity—a site of hegemonic struggle over meanings.

Finally, by positioning the technology (TV medium) and more specifically the genre (cultural production and forum) as a space for critical public debate and a site of struggle over meanings, representation becomes a key element for democracy. In this view, TV is a "cultural forum for debate." My

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<sup>2</sup> Although these programs are still popularly referred to as "the eight o'clock telenovelas," they do not actually start until around 9:00 p.m. *Jornal Nacional*, the national news program that precedes the prime-time telenovelas, varies in length by a few minutes nightly, so the starting time of the telenovela is inexact.

research is therefore preoccupied with social change and praxis, and the formation of a public sphere by a multiplicity of voices. Hence this analysis also builds on Newcomb and Hirsh's (1983) work, which shows that television, in its density, richness, and complexity, takes into account the range of meanings and responses generated by the interplay of audiences, creators, and network decision makers.

### **A Kiss Is (*Not*) Just a Kiss**

While the GLBTQ movement has steadily gained political and representational visibility for decades on television in the United States, the same is not true in Brazil (La Pastina, 2002). The limited representational possibilities and controversies associated with a commercial television model reliant on advertising revenue are present in both countries. For example, in 1990, in season 3 of *Thirtysomething*, David Marshall Grant's character, Russell, "hooks up" with Peter, played by Peter Frechette, resulting in U.S. network television's first homosexual "morning after" scene in bed: They are sitting up side by side, not touching, in the type of "where do we go from here?" moment played thousands of times by straight TV couples. The outcome of the scene was that ABC lost over a million dollars in ad revenue after the episode was broadcast (Brooke, 1997; Gauntlet, 2008).

Historically, Brazilian and U.S. representations of GLBT romantic love have one common characteristic: they both lack the physicality granted to heterosexual representations, although U.S. television is still light years ahead of Brazilian. For instance, in 1991 audiences saw a fleeting kiss between women in *LA Law* and a one-off lesbian kiss in *Roseanne* in 1994 (Gauntlet, 2008, p. 90). However, Ellen DeGeneres' coming out as a lesbian in real life and in her sitcom (in the 1997–98 season) caused a huge controversy. Advertisers fled the show, and ABC dropped *Ellen* "after one lesbian season" (Gauntlet, 2008, p. 88).

In the following decade, Americans were presented with more diverse GLBT story lines. In 2000, teens saw Willow fall in love with fellow witch Tara in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, although their relationship was sensitively developed, their physical expression of love never went beyond kisses on the cheek (p. 90). Not until May 2000 did the teen serial drama *Dawson's Creek* include what is considered the first male-male romantic kiss on a prime-time U.S. television program (Gauntlet, 2008; Wilke, 2000).

Therefore U.S. programs have managed to slowly introduce more diverse and somewhat less stereotypical GLBT(Q) story lines on shows such as *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), the *L Word* (2004–2009), and more recently *Modern Family* (2009–present). However, it is noteworthy that except for *Modern Family*, these shows are cable, not network programs, so the pressure associated with advertising revenue is less intense. Also significant is the fact that the only gay kiss on *Modern Family* aired on September 29, 2010, after much public discussion and pressure, on an episode titled "The Kiss."

When it comes to Brazil, however, few GLBT<sup>3</sup> images are available to viewers, especially on TV Globo, its largest network, and particularly not in its most successful programs: the primetime telenovelas. None of them features a GLBT character in the lead, and when one is present, the representation is limited and relies heavily on stereotypes such as the effeminate gay male and the masculine female (La Pastina, 2002; Trevisan, 1986, 2000).

**Bending Heterodeterministic Barriers, Representing Sexual Difference:  
*Senhora do Destino* ("Master of Her Own Destiny")**

In a media culture, representation on TV is crucial to a group's sense of identity and legitimacy. Since its launch 47 years ago, TV Globo has essentially become the "main, if not the only voice available to all Brazilians," and telenovelas have been essential to its project (La Pastina, 2002, p. 86). Thus, the ways in which TV Globo represents homosexuals and homosexual love stories is of key importance and must be addressed by communication research.

Telenovelas are central to popular culture and play a crucial role in creating and disseminating ideas and values that will acquire "common sense" status. Because of TV Globo's privileged position in Brazilian society and within the global television market, the network and its writers could act as agents of positive social change in representing sexual minorities, as was done in the past for racial minorities (Joyce, 2012). But when it comes to breaking down heterodeterministic barriers and biases, so far TV Globo has only slightly tweaked the traditional representational pattern. The "forbidden kiss that all Brazil is waiting to see" (Phillips, 2011) is yet to happen—at least, on TV Globo's screen.

Telenovelas' representational possibilities seem to be turning in favor of the GLBT community in Brazil. But cultural heterodeterministic ideas are slow to change. For example, between June 2004 and March 2005, TV Globo aired *Senhora do Destino* (Master of Her Own Destiny), which presented the lesbian couple Jenifer and Eleonora to audiences. As Joyce (2009) shows, this was a watershed moment within the genre, and more importantly within the heterodeterministic medium of Brazilian television, as they challenged the way lesbians were historically portrayed in Brazilian television.

The program's Brazilian writer, Aguinaldo Silva,<sup>4</sup> is an innovator in dealing with homosexuality in telenovelas. For the first time, Brazilians watched a true love story that also included a (subdued) sex scene between two lesbians. Another first for Brazilians was seeing a beautiful, young lesbian couple come to a happy ending in a telenovela, as such lovers usually wind up separated or dead (owing to, among

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<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to keep the *Q* (queer) out of this acronym because the queer are excluded not only from Brazilian television but also from the Brazilian GLS equivalent (Gays, Lesbians, and Sympathizers).

<sup>4</sup> *Senhora do Destino* was Aguinaldo Silva's 11th telenovela. Silva, 60 years old at the time, is a self-proclaimed homosexual. This was not the first time his plots had included gay characters, but it marked the first time homosexuals exchanged a small peck on the lips and, more importantly, had a happy ending. Silva has explicitly stated that it is part of his agenda to present more positive GLBT characters on the small screen (La Pastina, 2002, p. 92).

other things, pressure from the audience as stated previously). Another innovation was the two women's adopting a baby and starting a family, therefore breaking the traditional patriarchal code of the heterosexual family as the only acceptable one (Green, 1998; Joyce, 2009). Here the audience saw a different yet recognizable concept: two people falling in love and starting a family. The difference in this case was that the baby had two moms, a story line never before seen on the Brazilian television screen. The problem was that this couple never exchanged a romantic kiss.

Though the lesbians were not granted the physicality of the romantic kiss, their scripted lines were innovative and aided positive representation of the GLBT community. Thus, alongside the limiting agents of representation that are intrinsic to the medium and the genre, it is crucial to closely examine the text accompanying the characters while recognizing that "meaning is a social production, and as such is embedded in issues of power" (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003, p. 278). The multiple codes of the telenovela open up possibilities for gender-empowering readings and new gender relations. As previous investigations (Joyce, 2009; Valladares, 2005) have established, telenovelas exercise a fundamental role by representing Brazilian society on television. Over time, they have become a forum for debate about Brazilian private and public life. Social models of men and women, model relationships, and organizational models for family and friends are constantly shaped and reshaped by telenovelas and distributed throughout Brazilian territory and many parts of the world. They establish a pattern that the spectators don't necessarily agree upon, but they certainly serve as legitimate point of reference, allowing them to form an opinion by giving visibility to certain issues and behaviors and by blocking out others.

New representations—especially of homosexuals—are not always well received. This is unsurprising, considering that half of the world's Catholics live in Latin America, where they hold a monopoly of knowledge over what is, as Barthes (1972) puts it, "bons sens." According to a 2003 report by the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil has 125 million Catholics (73% of its population), more than any other country in the world. Moreover, evangelical Protestants represent 16% of the population (Prada, 2005, para. 6–9).

### **"The L Word"**

Brazilian telenovelas had portrayed homosexuals before Jenifer and Eleonora, but *Senhora do Destino* was the first to show (or at least infer) a sex scene between a gay couple and represent their relationship as a true, lasting love story like the traditional (melodramatic) love between a man and a woman usually portrayed in telenovelas. *Senhora do Destino* was also the first to depict a young lesbian couple who, besides having a happy ending, were also married through a "lawful agreement" and later adopted a boy. This is another dramatic strategy suggesting the emancipation of lesbians, since the representation of the characters and the plot accompanying them breaks away from the monopoly of knowledge of the Catholic Church by suggesting it is okay for women to live out their sexuality and start a nontraditional family.

As Joyce (2009) has shown, while the love story was innovative it also attested to the inherent bias of TV Globo's GLBT discourses. Jenifer and Eleonora's actions and dialogue were mostly ambiguous, and they did not seem to have any other friends or close relationships. Although on one occasion they

greeted each other with a quick peck on the lips, which is not uncommon for Brazilian women,<sup>5</sup> they never truly exchanged a kiss. But although the portrayal of these characters was problematic, they were nonetheless groundbreaking because they challenged ingrained patriarchal, heteronormative codes. For example, in the much-awaited scene where Eleonora professes her love for Jenifer, she delivered her lines unambiguously, not just to her love interest but to audiences at home as well: "I love you," she said. And just in case Eleonora's "I love you" was not clear enough, she added: "You want to find out if I prefer girls to boys and the answer is, definitely 'yes.'" When asked again what she felt, Eleonora replied: "Love, Jenifer, that is the word" (Brasil Sem Preconceito, 2011).

Though the lesbian couple never shared a romantic kiss, this particular relationship was a breakthrough GLBT representation in TV Globo telenovelas, which traditionally portray gay characters as caricatures or kill them off (Cimino, 2004, para. 2; La Pastina, 2002; ). And whereas the visual representation of the eventual "love scene" was subtle compared to other, heterosexual depictions, the dialogue was powerful, illustrating the bias in the visuality and publicity of the homoerotic in Globo's telenovelas. As author Aguinaldo Silva pointed out, perhaps "the culture was not ready for a more explicit scene" (Cimino, 2004, para. 5).

Thus, the much-awaited love scene was just a morning-after scene akin to the earlier example from *Thirtysomething*. And although the lovers professed their eternal love for one another in the dialogue preceding the scene (i.e., "without you I feel like I am dying"), the kiss that would seal their love never happened. Had it been a heterosexual relationship, the couple would most likely have exchanged a passionate kiss, but Eleonora and Jenifer embraced each other at length instead, crying and comforting one another until the telenovela cut to a different scene. This illustrates not the technological determinism of the medium but the hetero-bias imposed by the culture at large (Brasil Sem Preconceito, 2011).

Thus the "first lesbian sex scene" in a Brazilian telenovela left much to the imagination and little to visibility. Although the lovers were naked in bed (topless and barely covered by white sheets), the scene was not explicitly sexual, especially compared to the heterosexual sex scenes in most telenovelas and other screen productions (including *Senhora*). There were no kisses, but while in bed naked and strategically covered,<sup>6</sup> the two declared their true love for one another, whereupon the telenovela gained 48 points (an average of 72%) of the audience share for the 8:00 p.m. time slot (Novela 'Senhora do Destino', 2004, para. 3). Never before had Brazilians witnessed anything even close to this between homosexuals in a television production.

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<sup>5</sup> Although not widely adopted, the practice is known to be used in Brazil. Longtime television personality Hebe Camargo, currently a talk show host, greets her guests with a small kiss on the lips regardless of their gender.

<sup>6</sup> Only barely covered, Jenifer lay sideways in bed; viewers could see the backs of her legs all the way up to her buttocks, and her bare back. Eleonora was also strategically covered so as to leave no doubt that the characters were naked under the sheets.

**Medium, Network, Genre, and Culture:  
Powerful Limiting Agents of Representational Possibility**

Although groundbreaking, the story line discussed above received its share of criticism. The relationship was criticized as not believable because of the extent of innocence and naïveté in Eleonora and Jenifer's depiction. Here, the struggle over the monopoly of knowledge over discourses of homosexuality, and the perceived bias of the television medium are more clearly evident than ever. Joyce (2009) demonstrated the reaction with reference to an article by Brazilian singer, columnist, and gay activist Vange Leonel (2004):

After watching Jenifer and Eleonora exchange a quick peck on the lips (I missed the first one, because it was so quick), I was left with the sensation: "Is that all?" Unfortunately, yes. Well, fine, the girls are just getting to know each other and the little pecks "Hebe Camargo" style, very casual, are perfectly in context. But the fact is, while heterosexual couples tongue each other at first encounters, the lesbians in the telenovela are obligated to live a naïve romance, infantile, and almost retarded. I wonder if broadcast channels could show "homo-affection" in scenes a little bit more "caliente" on prime time TV. (para. 2)

While Leonel (2004) criticized the plot as naive, she also found room for kudos, arguing that "undeniably, TV Globo's telenovelas are slowly introducing homosexual love to their storylines, without the traditional tragic connotations" (para. 4) and mentioning the telenovela prior to *Senhora (Mulheres Apaixonadas, Women in Love)* by author Manuel Carlos:

In order to touch on the subject without hurting people's prejudices and taboos, the authors have to adopt careful strategies. Manuel Carlos, in *Mulheres Apaixonadas*, told the lesbian girls to carry their love in romantic and lustful stares to each other, and in intense hugs, but not with kisses, except in their final scene together when the two girls were in a theatrical play playing the parts of Romeo/Rafaela and Juliet/Clara.<sup>7</sup> In *Senhora*, Aguinaldo Silva decides to use the "pecks" because this type of greeting was made popular by the blond Hebe and probably no longer shocks anybody. (para. 2)

Leonel went on to criticize Brazilian society's sense of morals by pointing out that without leeway to portray the couple as having a "normal" relationship with the consequent, expected physical interchanges, the only subterfuge left to the writers and producers was the dialogue. The problem with relying mostly on dialogue to indicate homosexual love, the activist argued, is that some members of the audience might not pick up on what is in between the lines, and others might not take it seriously (para. 3).

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<sup>7</sup> Through this artifact (a theatrical play) the girls were able to exchange a quick kiss on the lips.

As reception studies have shown, another problem with using only dialogue to deliver an idea is that it leaves too much room for multiple interpretations by viewers. As Leonel (2004) argued, the ambiguous dialogue between Eleonora and Jenifer indeed left too much room for individual interpretation and detracted from the subject matter. The lack of physicality and total reliance on dialogue is a valid point that must be addressed. Not even after the "sex (less) scene" between the women did the audience see a real kiss between them. It is worth noting, however, that the scene was shot but not aired: The morning after they made love for the first time, the two exchanged a kiss on the lips while still in bed, naked, and took a shower together. The scene was cut but could be seen via TV Globo's electronic video library on the World Wide Web. According to Silva, the scene was not censored but rather cut because of technical reasons, as the episode was already too long (Brasil Sem Preconceito, 2011).

The "technical difficulties" illustrate once again the tug-of-war between culture and a discourse endorsing, if not promoting, acceptance of homosexuality. In the end, one thing was clear: The lesbian couple of *Senhora do Destino* was both exceptional and illustrative of the culture's and genre's limitations on portraying homosexual love. However, it led the way to more diverse portrayals of homosexuals in the future. The couple eventually got married and adopted a baby—a happy ending, and certainly a 180-degree turn from the habitual telenovela story line in which gays end up dead (Costa, 2004). As Costa (2004) pointed out, bearing in mind that the eight o'clock telenovela has the most "conservative audience," Aguinaldo Silva and TV Globo showed great courage and tact "when telling this taboo story" (Costa, 2004, para. 4). Costa (2004) recognized the plot's high degree of naïveté, but was nonetheless positive:

In an age when TV by subscription airs a "Reality Show" where homosexuals camouflage their choice with the help of hetero consultants (*Straight Plan for the Gay Man*, aired by Brazilian GNT), and where religious television commercials and magazine advertisements claim to have "the cure" for homosexuality, it is important that the subject is dealt with in such a noble space on Brazilian television without stereotypes and with subtlety. (para. 8)

Although Jenifer and Eleonora were granted the traditional happy ending formerly associated with heterosexuals only—getting married, adopting a child, and being accepted by their families (and perhaps more significantly, by the audience)—the televised representation of this homosexual love hardly reflected the Brazilian reality. No "official" numbers exist, but the Gay Group of Bahia, aka GGB (*Grupo Gay da Bahia*, Brazil's oldest association for the defense of homosexuals' human rights), estimates that most Brazilian homosexuals are not accepted by their families and opt to stay "in the closet" (Chaves, 2007, para. 2). Yet according to the founder of GGB, Professor Luiz Mott, "there are around 19 million gay, lesbian and transvestites in Brazil, or 10% of the population." Mott finds that these are the "social minority group who are the most discriminated against, and this intolerance starts within the private sphere of the home, where the parents do not accept such sexual orientation and as soon as they realize their children are gays or lesbians, they insult them, beat them and throw them out of the house." Although telenovelas are starting to tell more GLBT stories, this type of representation is still timid (Chaves, 2007, para. 3-4).

### ***Duas Caras***

The TV Globo telenovela *Duas Caras* (Two-Face) aired from October 1, 2007, to May 31, 2008. Once again, writer Aguinaldo Silva presented audiences with a progressive story line—this time, a love triangle. As expected, it did not go unnoticed, which highlights the struggle over discourses surrounding what is acceptable and what is not, as well as the powerful role TV Globo plays in creating and disseminating cultural ideas and ideals. Thiago Mendonça, the actor who played Bernardinho, a young gay man in *Duas Caras*, stated that Globo telenovelas do function as a type of public sphere. Bernardinho, a modern-day “Cinderello,” was forced to cook and clean for his stepmom and stepbrothers but eventually became a respected chef and opened a restaurant. Although these are traditional “feminine” traits and stereotypes associated with gay men (implying a lack of rugged masculinity), the actor praised Globo telenovelas and their portrayal of gays because “the telenovela invites debate by presenting the theme and therefore acting as a medium for discussion” (Chaves, 2007, para. 5).

For example, when Bernardo (Bernardinho’s father, actor Nuno Leal Maya) and Amara (the stepmom, actress Mara Manzan) caught Bernardinho in bed with Carlão (Lugui Palhares) in a morning-after scene, Amara shouted that homosexuality was a “disease, and that Bernardinho should see the pastor to get exorcised and therefore cured of it” (Ribeiro, 2007, para. 3). While this may reflect a broad cultural belief (based on the history of portrayals of gays and lesbians), the audience nevertheless identified with Bernardinho’s plight—that is, his constant exploitation, as well as the fact that the evil stepmother had paid Carlão to seduce him. Viewers might thus have found themselves torn between hating and loving Bernardinho, or between the viewpoint of a culture and that of an openly gay telenovela writer and his beloved character Bernardinho, producing a debate situation and highlighting the struggle over meaning once again.

Another instance of a clear struggle over the monopoly of knowledge is complicated by the fact that, generally speaking, regardless of whether one professes to be Christian (or a derivative of that faith), a moralist, or a *machista*, in Brazil as in other Latin cultures, what makes a man gay is his passive status in the relationship, as exemplified by this scene: Minutes after leaving Bernardinho’s bed, Carlão announced he was a “sword,” a Brazilian slang term implying a man in all senses: strength, masculinity, virility, penetration, and finally, heterosexuality. He added that the sex between them was merely “a new experiment, I am a ‘sword’ and I was active, remember?” This was the first time this issue was openly addressed on Brazilian television (Ribeiro, 2007, para. 3), once more inviting a dialogue between audience members and the medium and genre that represent them.

Aware of this situation, Aguinaldo Silva has said he consciously writes audacious dialogue for his characters and did not veer away from any type of controversy when writing for *Duas Caras* (Ribeiro, 2007, para. 4–5). But heterodeterminism reveals what no amount of good intentions can do. Aguinaldo Silva has admitted that when it comes to the visual side of storytelling, the possibilities are still finite. The so-called gay kiss “is still taboo, and as such, miles away from being shown on TV. Men can even be shown in bed together. But no kisses allowed!” (Ribeiro, 2007, para. 6).

### ***Insensato Coração***

Things seemed to be taking a turn as recently as 2011 in TV Globo's prime-time telenovela *Insensato Coração* (Foolish Heart). *Insensato* was cutting-edge: It broke the mold by not only presenting audiences with a handful of gay characters rather than just one "token," but also addressing the current culture of gay-bashing, beatings, and other violence in Brazil. Even though most Brazilian cities have outspoken gay communities, the churches' monopoly of knowledge about homophobic discourses persists in Brazil. For example, according to GGB, 198 gay people were murdered in Brazil in 2009, up from 122 two years earlier (Phillips, 2011, para. 3). Thus Ricardo Linhares, one of *Insensato's* creators, expressed hope that the soap would help "combat prejudice and promote acceptance" and that "we are going to take on a contemporary and pertinent issue" (para. 2).

The GLBT community welcomed the change in representation. Toni Reis, president of the Brazilian Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transsexual Association, saw the program as an important opportunity to break stereotypes and bring "visibility" to Brazilian society, which usually receives a "distorted image of the gay community, with mentions of homosexuality restricted to three types of programming: comedy, crime, and religious broadcasts where evangelical preachers rail against homosexuality" (Phillips, 2011, para. 4-8).

While *Insensato Coração* was innovative in its story line as well as its "visibility-by-numbers" portrayal of gay characters, the much-awaited kiss did not happen. Gilberto Braga, the telenovela's main writer, contradicted Ricardo Linhares with a simple, blunt statement: "The audience is not ready." As expected, activists were disappointed. As Reis attested, "the decision showed a lack of courage and audacity. Kissing is a display of affection, and not an affront to society. Corruption, violence, accidents: these are affronts, and are shown on TV in excess." Additionally, Reis added that he did not "think will be long before a gay kiss happens in a *novela*. If there is no kiss, then this will be a sign of prejudice" (Phillips, 2011, para. 13-15).

### **At Last, "The Kiss"**

As La Pastina (2002) has suggested, homophobia in Brazil can be traced to repression by the Catholic Church, but more importantly, the persistence of the homophobic tradition depends largely on the media and its capacity to maintain negative stereotypes of lesbians and gays (La Pastina, 2002, p. 88). This dependence spotlights the concern over the absent homo-kiss and insufficient physicality in the portrayal of homoerotic storylines. Pressure to get high ratings could explain the lack, which in turn may justify a bold move pulled by the SBT network (*Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão*, the Brazilian Television System), one of TV Globo's competitors. Unexpectedly in May 2011, Brazilian audiences were at last shown the first homosexual kiss in a telenovela when SBT aired a lip-lock between two women in the telenovela *Amor e Revolução* (Love and Revolution), set during the military dictatorship in Brazil.

The lesbian kiss between Marcela and Marina was not just a peck and in fact lasted 40 seconds, which shows that the bias really is not one of technological determination, but one of culture, or TV Globo and its "highly polished cultural products" (La Pastina, 2002, p. 86). "The kiss," as various media outlets

termed it, aired exactly a week after the Brazilian Supreme Court ruled in favor of civil unions between homosexuals that grant them the same marriage rights as heterosexual couples (Delia, 2011). However, while cultural discourses and ultimately legal decisions surrounding homosexuality might be changing in Brazil, SBT's portrayal of "the kiss" appears to have been less preoccupied with a progressive representation or historical moment than with ratings.

Whereas TV Globo has used the argument of low ratings (and the corresponding price of commercial airtime) to justify the sudden change in gay-related storylines (La Pastina, 2002, p. 95) and the lack of "the kiss," the controversies and the buzz generated by the theme nonetheless boosted TV Globo's rival, SBT, whose viewership doubled on the night of the broadcast to 11% of the audience share, according to the Brazilian ratings system IBOPE<sup>8</sup> (Com beijo, 2011). The share is still small compared with ratings for TV Globo productions, some of which reach 68% (Joyce, 2012, p. 78), but the fact that it doubled in one night is significant.

IBOPE points have been the schema for measuring Brazilian television ratings since the 1980s. In fact, the expression "my IBOPE is high/low" has become part of the popular lexicon in Brazil, indicating a person's likeability factor. As Mattelart and Mattelart (1990) explain:

The "tyranny" that IBOPE exercises over programming is expressed by rights of life or death over any one program. A *novela* which fails to obtain a satisfactory IBOPE rating after a certain number of episodes will be prematurely terminated, whereas a *novela* that maintains a high rating will see its life span increased. (p. 65)

TV Globo has consistently used IBOPE as the reason for gay characters' near absence from its productions, and as previously stated, superficiality and lack of depth in representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered characters in Brazilian telenovelas has traditionally been the norm (La Pastina, 2002, p. 90). Additionally, as I have suggested, a key aspect of the lack of depth in such story lines is the denial of the homoerotic physical contact that is granted to sexual or beloved others in the GLBT community. This has been the case traditionally, especially in TV Globo productions.

"The kiss" aired on SBT is noteworthy, given SBT's lesser cultural role and smaller audience size compared to TV Globo, but perhaps it was not as important as it could have been. The fact that it happened is a step in the right direction, but the history of SBT and its owner, Silvio Santos, attest that the lesbian kiss had more to do with the fight for ratings than with a progressive social movement in Brazil. As La Pastina shows (2002),

SBT has traditionally targeted classes C and D,<sup>9</sup> attempting to attract a broader audience among the lower-income segments of the population with sensationalist programming

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<sup>8</sup> *Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística*, Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics.

<sup>9</sup> The index adopted in Brazil by the association of audience and market-survey agencies, ABA/ABIPEME, weights cultural capital in determining one's social class. The criteria balance the education of the head of

and melodramatic telenovelas imported from Mexico. . . . Unlike the Globo network, which has traditionally targeted the C and B segments of the population with its slickly produced telenovelas, SBT has traditionally avoided including topical issues in its programming, preferring to produce historical melodramas when not purchasing Mexican melodramas. (p. 89)

Furthermore, Silvio Santos has publicly declared that he does not believe “it is right to show homosexuals on television . . . the public doesn’t like them. . . . If I can I do not put homosexuals on TV. But personally I don’t have anything against them” (La Pastina, 2002, p. 89). Thus, the space for the representation for GLBT characters, love-story plots, and physical expressions of love on Brazilian television is clearly limited not only by the monopoly of knowledge of the churches, and by TV Globo, the biggest network in Brazil, but also by the attitude reinforced by Silvio Santos, owner of the second-largest network, SBT.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusions

After almost half a century of TV Globo’s telenovelas, viewers have yet to see a gay kiss. This analysis has built on previous research that investigated historical and current portrayals of GLBT characters in Brazilian telenovelas, specifically by adding another layer to it: the lack of physicality granted to the characters and, more precisely, the exchange of a romantic kiss. I have explored this traditional bias of the Brazilian television medium—particularly in TV Globo’s telenovelas—as it relates to representations of homosexual love by pointing to a few different contributing factors—network-, medium, and genre-specific biases such as the codes of TV—as powerful limiting agents of representational possibility.

Thus, the idea of technological determinism was expended to read culture itself as deterministic so as to properly account for the particular biases in the use of the television medium in different national contexts. As previously shown, in-house censorship, ratings, culture, and the churches’ monopoly of knowledge come together in a powerful and limiting interplay culminating in narrow representational possibilities and the ultimate absence of the physicality of the long-awaited gay kiss.

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the family with the possession of several key icons of acquisitive power to classify social classes in five hierarchical groups from A to E (La Pastina, 2002, p. 97).

<sup>10</sup> Although Rede Record managed to surpass SBT’s popularity as recently as 2011, becoming TV Globo’s main competitor for a while (Antunes, 2011), its position has been unstable and indeed has recently changed. *Veja* magazine (August 14, 2012) reported that SBT had reclaimed its “silver medal” in the ratings race, thus becoming the second-strongest network again. Journalist Lauro Jardim tracked the fight for IBOPE points between Rede Record and SBT throughout 2012 and has also cited SBT as the second largest network in Brazil (see Jardim, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). It is noteworthy that Rede Record belongs to Bishop Edir Macedo of the Neo-Pentecostal Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, one of Brazil’s biggest anti-gay activists (Antunes, 2011).

Key to this analysis is a struggle over what Innis (1951) described as a "monopoly of knowledge" over the discourses that deem homosexuality "acceptable," as proposed by a few writers such as Aguinaldo Silva and Ricardo Linhares, and the discourse viewing it as "unacceptable" and strange, as propounded by TV Globo and some of its decision makers, SBT and Silvio Santos (acting as creators of culture), and ultimately the Brazilian culture at large, with its strong Roman Catholic heritage and growing evangelical population.

Despite the important strides made by TV Globo's representation and inclusion of GLBT storylines in telenovelas, such representation still usually relies heavily on stereotypes and, perhaps most importantly, prohibits any physical expression of gay love, thereby adding weight to discourses that deem homosexuality wrong, abnormal, shameful, and sinful. Ultimately, in a medium that is intrinsically visual, gay characters may express their love and affection only verbally and ambiguously.

Progressive storylines have potential to positively influence the cultural life of homosexuals in Brazil, but so far they have been limited and lack the multidimensionality they deserve (Joyce, 2009; La Pastina, 2002). The genre is complex on the one hand, but filled with potential on the other. It cannot be reduced to a simplistic dichotomy of "good" and "bad." Although I have shown that TV Globo story lines are becoming more innovative, which may yield to changes in the understanding of cultural codes such as heteronormativity the representation of the GLBT community is still problematic, in the absence of "the kiss."

Yet, contrary to Marshall McLuhan's technological determinism, I have suggested a heterodeterministic bias that results not from the television medium but from the culture at large and also by the disseminators and creators of culture. By regarding Brazilian culture (heavily influenced by Christianity) itself as deterministic, we can properly account for the particular biases applied in the use of the medium of TV in different national contexts, for instance, the representation of homosexual love in the telenovela genre, and more specifically in TV Globo's productions.

As I have demonstrated, telenovelas are a site of mediations between production, reception, and culture. There is constant negotiation between the writers, director, production team, actors, audience, and institutions that participate in the social formation of gender roles, sexuality, and other cultural meanings (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990; Melo, 1998). This process helps explain how, in the race for ratings, the underdog SBT became the first to present audiences with "the kiss." So while the motive in changes in representation might not be noble, it may however be akin to a realization that has already happened in the United States: Advertisers came to see that although sexual minorities are powerless culturally, they do have power economically (Sender, 2006).

Finally, the sheer number of gays and lesbian characters in recent TV Globo telenovelas indicates that the audience has come at least to expect, if not accept, their presence. To what is this change owed? Possible answers may range from optimistic—producers, writers, and audiences are becoming more open-minded—to more cynical ones: All is fair in the ratings war, and writers, especially those at TV Globo, are in competition for the title of "most audacious" (Marthe, 2007, para. 2). Perhaps the winner will be the writer who is finally able to visually depict a romantic kiss between homosexuals, destabilizing, only if

temporarily, the tug-of-war between medium, genre, networks, ratings, and culture. When will this happen? Stay tuned!

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