



Television Representations and Symbolic Reproduction of Inequality

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It has been difficult to understand the relationship between mediated images of poverty in telenovelas and the symbolic reproduction of inequalities in Brazil, due in part to two factors: 1) the denial of the structural causation of social classes; and 2) the construction of images in which people are seen as autonomous actors over their personal lives. The objective of this paper is to highlight some telenovela images of poverty and to make some preliminary suggestions about the impact of these images in the lives of young, working class people on the basis of 20 interviews. One assumption made about telenovelas is that they give viewers a window into the lives of characters in various social classes, spurring a desire to trade places with others. In terms of my interviewees, more than half (14) had negotiated readings of poverty and meritocracy, while few (2) saw the political or social causes of inequality. This suggests that preferred and negotiated readings of poverty could be associated with telenovela viewing, an act which, in turn, promotes faith in personal merit and obscures Brazilian inequalities.

Brazilian telenovelas have traditionally worked to symbolically reproduce social inequality in Brazil through at least two representational strategies. First, the telenovelas tend to veil the social structures that reproduce the existence of social classes. Second, they provide images of a society made up of autonomous individuals who are capable or incapable of managing their personal lives. These strategies place television squarely in the process of hegemony, reproducing dominant power relations despite optimistic predictions of neoliberalism's untethering of social relations during the "happy days" of the 1990s (Curran, 2006, pp. 137-138). Instead, telenovelas are the instrument of what geographer Milton Santos (2000, pp. 40-43) calls "perverse globalization," a movement in which the stability of production forces is maintained through de-territorializing myths of freedom to produce and consume without state oversight.

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Although these telenovela strategies are commonplace, most reception studies in Brazil have focused on moments in which viewers, particularly those located at the bottom of social hierarchies, resist these hegemonic strategies.² In other words, studies of working-class reception (Leal, 1986; Vink, 1990; Jacks, 1999; Tufte, 2000) have failed to pinpoint the extents to which their subjects accepted, negotiated, or opposed specific representations. Among them, only Leal (1986, p. 89) explicitly raises my concern with the role of ideological reproduction when she affirms that conformity and subversion with the social order seem to balance each other out, because “without them the very effectiveness of the social order would be jeopardized.”

This study considers viewers’ complicity in reproducing dominant ideology when they react to the telenovela characters who exemplify it. In 2007, my students and I began a reception study of two telenovelas with 20 working-class youths as a preliminary step toward understanding how these understudied television viewers interpret this dominant cultural form in Brazil.³ Despite the supposed openness of television texts, their readings of the telenovelas reveal the difficulty of overcoming textual ideology, the desire to read meritocratic meanings, and the limited forms of resistance to dominant ideology.

Social Classes and Inequalities in Brazil

In Brazilian telenovelas, social inequalities are resolved through the drama of the narrative. Emotional ties — often performed ritualistically through the marriage of rich and poor characters — and economic ties to a shared consumer market frequently serve to eliminate potential social class conflicts by correlating personal competence with material comfort. Thus, while the divides between rich and poor have increased dramatically in real terms, the causal and ongoing conflicts between rich and poor are minimized in the telenovelas.

² These social hierarchies are gendered, generational, and classed. According to Hamburger (2005, p. 80), audience research data show that telenovelas’ most loyal audiences are female adolescents, middle-class elderly women, and working-class women. However, it must also be pointed out that studies of television do generally tend to show that high- and middle-class viewers reject melodramas, so as not to seem uneducated.

³ This study evolved through several stages prior to the reception study. Our research group made contact with our subjects initially in 2006 through one private and three public high schools in the area. We then went to these classrooms in 2006-2007 to begin an ethnographic phase in which we observed and surveyed students in different class settings. In one classroom, we showed an episode of the telenovela *Páginas da Vida*, followed by class discussions and surveys. From all of the participating schools, 47 students completed a survey on socioeconomic status and media consumption in order to document their habitus, tastes, and perceptions of representations of poverty in telenovelas. From this base, we selected 20 working-class students (8 boys and 12 girls), ages 15-18, for repeated individual interviews at their respective schools and homes. In all, we have spent more than a year studying our young subjects. Lírian Sifuentes, Marco Antonio Neves, Jr., Gabrielli Dalla Vecchia, Karina A. Dacol, Juliana R. Gelatti, and Laura H. Wottrich worked to collect and evaluate field notes. They are part of the Media, Reception, and Cultural Consumption research nucleus.

Meanwhile, the numbers of people that qualify as "poor" have expanded dramatically in Brazil, marginalizing an entire spectrum of people that had previously been considered working-class. As Bauman (1998, p. 76) quips, "If the richest fifth of the world population was, in 1960, 30 times richer than the poorest fifth; in 1991, it was already 61 times richer." Globalization has brought declining class mobility, influencing the distribution of chances, experiences, and rewards in contemporary societies. In Europe, the chances of a middle-class child maintaining class status is four times greater than the chances of a working-class child moving into the low-middle class (Curran, 2006, pp. 142-143). In Brazil, the working class has become a spectrum of class fractions, experiencing wide degrees of poverty and marginality. The term marginality can be defined as a social exclusion that connotes various aspects beyond poverty and income destitution, such as irrelevancy in society, a weak sense of group membership, and being the subject of social prejudice.

Marginality can also signify the impossibility of becoming a subject capable of managing his or her own destiny or life (Demo, 2003, pp. 12 & 36). Social marginality and poverty in Brazil now range from relative poverty (difficulties with leading a working class life) to absolute poverty (the impossibility of leading a working class life) for families who cannot satisfy basic needs (Demo, 2003, p. 41; Zaluar, 1994, p. 41). Symbolically excluded from consumer markets and political spheres of representation, the vast numbers of poor people in Brazil frequently appear in media as slum dwellers, drug dealers, or as the sick and infirm. The conditions that might have allowed social connections between the richest and poorest people in society have been severed, leaving the vast majority of workers more prone to social prejudice. Such a process, according to Zaluar (1994, p. 17 & pp. 33-34), makes Brazilian cities seem similar to cities in 19th century Europe, when the public perception of the working classes was as the dangerous classes.

Writing on inequalities in recent times, sociologist Jessé Souza (2003) uses the phrase "ideology of performance" to explain how people in peripheral societies, such as Brazil, legitimate inequalities in their daily lives using the myth of meritocracy. According to Souza, this ideology divides the world into people who deserve appreciation versus those who deserve disregard, and it accomplishes this by classifying the people according to individual qualification, position, and income. This triad of seemingly objective performance indicators legitimates social class in terms of individual merit, rewarding the winners, "but also legitimizing the permanent differential access to chances in life and the appropriation of commodities" (2003, p. 169). Souza concludes that, in what he calls "peripheral modern societies," the ideology of performance transforms the traditional contradiction between bourgeois' and workers' class interests into a struggle between the included and the excluded. The former group includes the bourgeoisie, the middle classes, and the workers, while the latter group is reserved for the lumpen-proletariat (*ibid.*, p. 185). We believe that the specificities of Brazilian peripheral modernity can explain the representations of poverty and the relations between the middle class and the working class. Some empirical data, for example, point to the following: a) the non-identification of low-working-class youth as belonging to the poor class or being under the poverty line since they see themselves as not belonging to the real destitute; and b) the perception of poverty as a consequence of personal capacity or incapacity. The issue at stake here, for us, is how to relate these perceptions to the reading of telenovelas.

Although ideological issues have gone out of fashion in reception studies, the material and social realities in Brazil seem to justify taking another look at how media “confer rational meaning to divisions, asymmetries, inequalities and social hierarchies, in short, collaborate in the internalization of social ideology” (Chauí, 2006, p. 78). For all of the focus on the ways viewers resist and negotiate mediated messages, there is still the need for empirical research to explain why ideology is still effective. The specificities of Brazilian modern social classes and the ideology of performance may, together help to explain how young people who belonged to the working class (“*classes populares*” in Brazil) could not identify the upwardly mobile poor person in telenovelas as representing members of their own social class. Contrasting the positive representations of the poor in telenovelas with negative news portrayals, they constructed hierarchies between themselves and those who they saw as more destitute. These hierarchies are then justified through an ideology that positions the masses as worthy of their destitution.

Reading Representations of Poverty

If a genre is a set of shared rules which organize producers’ and consumers’ communicational competence (Straubhaar, 2004, p. 160), telenovelas are a genre particularly open to interpretation. Telenovelas invite viewers to reflect on behaviors and values, debate prejudices (Leal, 1986; Kottak, 1990; Vink, 1990; Ronsini, 1995; Martín-Barbero & Muñoz, 1992; Tufte, 1995; Jacks, 1999; Lopes et al., 2002), and, (modestly and rarely) make social critiques based on classes’ inequalities. Performance ideology can be observed in various forms in the genre, from working one’s way up on the job to modeling behaviors that are associated with a better social position. Luck, fate, and magic play strong roles in telenovela narratives, but the success of characters in the narratives is not mere luck; it is dependent on effort and persistence in achieving professional competence and acquiring goods. Telenovelas thus go beyond Souza’s (2003) schema of performance ideology by emphasizing that destiny and fate are primarily determined by personal relationships that promote social mobility. The telenovela genre does promote discussion, to be sure, but these discussions are framed by meritocratic ideology, which leaves individuals responsible for social mobility.

Representation, for Woodward (2000, p. 17), “includes signification practices and symbolic systems through which the signified are produced, positioning us as subjects.” In telenovelas, class antagonisms are hidden through the visibility of poor people, such as domestic servants. Acting as virtuous subjects by being at the beck and call of their employers, servant characters erase class hierarchies by living with, and becoming important members of, rich families. Sacrificing their own lives, servants offer a fantasy of a world in which harmonious class relations allow the poor to acquire a new habitus. Histories of the Brazilian telenovela confirm class harmony is most frequently represented through individual characters whose efforts overcome their low class status and impoverished conditions (Kottak, 1990; Ortiz, Ramos & Borelli, 1991; Straubhaar, 2004; Hamburger, 2005). As such, the problem is not that rich and poor people do not exist in the telenovela; in fact, they are quite visible. Yet, as Tufte (1995, p. 45) has pointed out in his reception analysis of working-class women, the telenovela places characters at the intersections of multiple discourses about race, gender, and class, leading readers to see characters “not only in terms of their material situations, but also in immaterial terms, such as human qualities, aesthetics, tastes, and social habits.” In other words, telenovelas show a Brazilian society of rich and poor whose existence is not determined by a class structure, but by a competence or incompetence

in assuming a privileged or subaltern position.

I began this research as an attempt to unify the encoding/decoding model, which stimulated audience reception studies internationally (cf. Morley, 1980, 2006; Hall, 2003b), with a Latin American perspective on mediations. Whereas audience scholars frequently look at “decoding” as the ways that audiences interpret a single text (Kim, 2004), my research posits how telenovelas as an entire genre might be decoded through meritocratic ideology and discourses about poverty. In other words, encoding/decoding as a methodological model for reception studies must be better connected to a theory of mediations established by Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987, 2002). In Martín-Barbero’s theory, television texts are appropriated according to the cultural, social, political, and economic experiences of receivers. These experiences further explain textual reception in the context of why and how viewers use television as a medium.

For the study, I considered two telenovelas, *Páginas da Vida* (2006) and *Paraíso Tropical* (2007), which are both broadcast during prime time on the Globo Network, the largest Brazilian network and the primary telenovela producer for audiences across all social classes. This broadcast situation makes viewing these two programs a national ritual (Hamburger, 2005, p. 73). Globo’s telenovelas further exemplify narrative conventions that oppose rich and poor characters, conventions repeated weekly in a narrative analysis of *Páginas* and *Paraíso*.⁴ In both of these novelas, the central theme contrasts rich and poor or economically precarious characters who fall in love: a lawyer’s daughter and a gardener’s son; a son of a rich business owner and a daughter of middle-class family that has hit difficult financial times; two poor twin sisters who fall for the same rich, young business owner; and an accomplished businessman who falls in love with a single mother. These contrasts appear in scenes in which the poor but worthy characters tell their past histories or future dreams. *Paraíso*, for example, features the protagonists Paula and Daniel speaking about their migration from the Northeast to Rio de Janeiro in terms of their own personal efforts and competencies, as well as the hard work they did to enter the middle class.

In my initial discussions, more than half of the 20 interviewees approved, either partially or completely, of the efforts of intelligent and hard-working poor characters.⁵ They attributed their social mobility to their merits as people. They believed that the characters’ performances of middle-class norms allowed them to fulfill their dreams of material comfort and professional success. They were universal characters; as Barthes affirms, “It is characteristic of the bourgeoisie ideology to deny the existence of a bourgeoisie class, establishing the figure of the universal man” (1987, p. 162). As some young people said:

“In *Páginas da Vida*, the relationship between employer and employee was quite good, and it gave me the impression of reality” (Gerson).

⁴ This analysis consisted of extensive data collection, a process in which the researchers viewed, coded, and categorized narrative contents that dealt with issues of class relations and characters’ social trajectories.

⁵ All interviewees gave permission to share their information. We have given them pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

"The rich people were not arrogant in the telenovela. The telenovela showed that the poor can be more arrogant than the rich" (Clotilde).

"There are rich people who are nice and they do not give the impression that they are wealthy. There are people who are well-dressed who really do not have a cent of their own" (Emerson).

The youths' readings of telenovela characters parallel Maria Carmem Jacob de Souza's (1999) investigation of character construction in Globo's 25 top-rated prime time telenovelas during the 1980s and 1990s. These novelas tended to emphasize working-class characters' social mobility through marriage into a higher social position. Although marriage has traditionally been seen as a female strategy for entering the middle class, telenovelas have presented class conflicts resolved through the marriage of rich, female characters to poor, male characters.⁶ De Souza's finding was supported even though the writers of the telenovelas, many of whom were well-known critical authors, also explicitly denounced the reproduction of social inequities in the telenovelas.

At the same time, this strong message associating wealth and virtue is mediated by others. In the text, the mediation of personal romance as a social mobility strategy was cut by other themes in the telenovelas, allowing a degree of openness in how the genre resolves social problems. The opposition, for example, between modernity and tradition is often ambiguous. Modernity may be idealized as a progressive cosmopolitanism as opposed to a rural conservatism, but it can also signify moral corruption against goodness. These tensions in the genre may allow viewers choices in their identifications with characters. As I have shown in previous reception research (Ronsini, 2004), many working-class people, themselves migrants from rural to urban areas, see themselves as in-between modern and rural life. Telenovelas invite viewers to celebrate aspects of those lives that they have left behind.

At the same time, telenovelas' messages about class contrast with those presented by other genres, particularly news programs, which often precede and follow telenovela broadcasts. Studies of journalistic coverage of crime (Champagne, 1999; Vaz, 2006) have illustrated the ways that the close association between slums and criminality reinforce stigmas against working-class subjects. In Rio, news reports frequently cast middle-class people as the only victims of crime, impeding any perception of working-class people as either victims or at risk of suffering from crime. These images also affect young people's self-perceptions, encouraging them to distance themselves from members of their own class who are represented as criminals and to identify instead with the fictional individual characters of the telenovelas, as they are perceived to be more authentic than the so-called "real" people in TV newscasts.⁷

⁶ The examples are numerous, but we would like to mention three of them, two from the first phase of telenovelas and one from the present moment: rich landowner's young enemies marry daughters or granddaughters of these patriarchs (*Irmãos Coragem*, 1970; *Gabriela*, 1975); the gardener's son dates a middle-class lawyer's daughter, one of the poor employee's daughter marries the rich landowner and businessman's son (*Páginas da Vida*, 2006).

⁷ This idea of an individual that thinks and behaves autonomously, who exists, first "inside himself/herself," was thoroughly studied by Norbert Elias (1994) by comparing several historical

This alignment with fictional television characters over a real working class places an added burden on viewers who cannot claim that suffering is a social problem but assume that it is part of their own responsibility.

Our interviews revealed these tensions. Telenovelas present structurally complex characters that are not purely Manichean distillations of good versus evil. Yet the social problems they face must be resolved through individual moral choices. Much like the behavior of the adolescent readers of a Brazilian magazine for girls (Freire, 2007), our analysis reveals that subjects tended to reduce social conflicts to questions of individual blame and responsibility. Interviewees blamed unsuccessful telenovela characters for failing to achieve success.

"A world without poverty could be feasible if people had a stronger drive to improve their life conditions" (Lúcio).

"To get a job, you have to go well-groomed, clean, to the interview. You have to think what you will say, you cannot say foolish things. You need a good, well-presented, clean resume . . ." (Sonia).

"Without money, you cannot do a thing, but you need the money. Of course, if you are poor, you can also be happy. Personal drive is necessary to get things" (Tati).

As these quotations show, lack of success connected them to a chain of other negative signifiers, such as laziness or sloppiness, which characterized their moral weaknesses. The reception of the telenovelas among the majority of our subjects illustrated the most cruel symbolic dominance for working class people: in short, when they are "ashamed of themselves" (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 95).

It is not that the interview subjects passively accepted such narratives. After all, the encoding/decoding model emphasizes the negotiation of meaning. In my interviews, the young people differentiated telenovelas' plots based on their proximity to "real life," in which good people do not always experience a "happy ending." Irrespective of these negotiations, however, interviewees spoke of telenovelas in terms of their emotional realism (Ang 1996), or their ability to demonstrate universal feelings of love, hate, pity, and complacency associated with "human nature."

"There are many stories on TV, stories of very poor people who succeed through hard work or pure luck, and that makes me want to help my family too" (Flávio).

periods. He concluded that since the Renaissance, the stress on the "I" over "We" has reached its apex, encouraging individualization in relation to family, state, religion, and class allegiances.

"I'd love to have a swimming pool like the ones on the novela, but it's impossible, and that's OK" (Vilma).

"The rich characters are always the calmer ones, or the ones who are too arrogant. Everything is exaggerated" (Renato).

"I think Olivia in *Páginas da Vida* shows a good rich person. She works to sustain her son and lives with her father. She is really great" (Carla).

Emotional realism displaced other forms of social realism, leading to debates about individuals over society, and the erasure of historical reasons behind inequalities.

More than half of the interviewees' readings of the genre reflected a fragmented and contradictory vision of their world. In accordance with Hall's (2003a, p. 371) prediction, most readings are negotiated, correlating with a lack of the political engagement needed for an oppositional reading. Indeed, 14 of the 20 research subjects oscillated between the rejection and acceptance of meritocracy, while nine subjects hovered between seeing poverty as inevitable (without a political solution) and avoidable.

"There is always someone who will earn more. There are some people who are dying of hunger in Cuba" (Renata).

"A world without poverty will only be possible if it is made anew" (Sonia).

"Poverty is worldwide that it is impossible to end it" (Carla).

"A classmate of mine, who was very poor, went to school only to create problems, to raise hell, while I went there to study" (Janaína).

In terms of the interviewees' visions of poverty, I found that eight of the respondents did see the potential for resolving inequalities through collective organization, offering a more critical point-of-view. "Danusa," for one, offered this solution: "I think that if the poor organized, they wouldn't be so poor. If they organized themselves into associations, they wouldn't be so bad off. They wouldn't be rich, but they would have better life conditions." What is interesting to note is that these respondents engaged in other consumer activities that they saw as equal in importance to telenovela watching. Five of these respondents were fans of Afro-Brazilian hip-hop culture and/or Brazilian music, such as samba or pagode. Another respondent considered herself an avid short story and poetry reader. The mediation of national culture makes a difference to the cultural capital of these youngsters, confirming what many communication researchers point out: that "local" appropriations of national culture can contribute to a critical vision of the world.

What the application of the encoding/decoding model permits is the connection of negotiated and preferred telenovela readings with the negotiated and/or preferred visions of meritocratic ideology. The majority of the interviewees that had oppositional decodings of the representations of poverty or

inequality never questioned an upward mobility based on one's merit or personal skills. Similarly, those who disbelieved in the class harmony represented on screen still believed it was possible to break down class barriers through personal interactions. In other words, personal merit was seen as a concrete upward mobility strategy. This belief relieved subjects' discomfort with other perceived notions of inequality and injustice. The telenovela, with its constant promotion of meritocracy, thus contributed to the obscuring of Brazilian inequalities for viewers. It was the ideology of performance that kept young people attached to middle-class taste hierarchies and promised social mobility as a reward for their efforts.

Conclusion

Given the limits of this short inquiry into complex questions of media reception and the social reproduction of inequalities, it is difficult to assess how the negotiation and resistance to telenovela themes might be correlated to other personal strategies for social mobility. It is nevertheless worthwhile to ask how interview subjects manage their personal interpretations in relation to the "others" they identify in the telenovelas they watch, in the other media they consume, and in their own social lives. Bourdieu maintains that mechanisms that scholars recognize as resistance can be just as alienating as those that have been identified as submission. This is the double nature of domination: "If . . . I work to efface everything that is likely to reveal my origins, or to trap me in my social position (an accent, physical composure, family relations), should we then speak of submission?" (in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 23-24).

Media reception studies could avoid the tendency to overemphasize the importance of resistance to ideological media messages. In the vast majority of instances, as this study demonstrates, media consumers comply with meritocratic ideology even as they negotiate dominant discourses about poverty and inequality in the genre. As Bourdieu (2008, p. 73) has asserted, ideology is both a driving interest and a foundational illusion. As a dominant cultural form in Brazil, telenovelas allow their viewers vicarious contact with people from other social classes. For some, the genre confirmed their class position. For others, it reinforced desires for class mobility. In both cases, interpretations of the genre conformed to the expectation that they were the only ones responsible for their position in life, reproducing their own class inequalities even as some strove to overcome their personal circumstances. These statements are tactics, informed by a habitus of social tastes and expectations. Perhaps they are resistant, but not to the dominant social order.

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