

THE “TELENOVELA”

What is a *telenovela*? Its literal meaning is “a novel transmitted by television.” This implies a means of transmission—the television—and a form of discourse—the novel. The *telenovela*.

TN is a widespread form of narrative in several Latin American countries and in Brazil. Considered in its formal aspect, the phenomenon of TN is a conquest of the Brazilian television. It is the backbone of the daily programmes of the television broadcasting station in the great urban centres of the country.

The *telenovela*, considered as a television show, is presented in the form of serials, in the evening hours, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. This is the so-called *prime time*, in which the largest number of TV sets are on. The TN is nowadays, in Brazil, something quite different from the French *feuilletons télévisés*, and from the North-American *soap-operas* or even the *daytime serials*. The difference is that the TN is not transmitted during the daytime; besides, commercial sponsorship has nothing to do with soap companies and its typical discourse is not similar to the dramatic representation of the opera.

So, as to morphology, the TN is a qualitative integration of a script, of movie techniques in the image (*travellings, closes, etc.*) and of theatrical interpretation, in first instance. However, we can immediately observe that its great difference from a theater play or a film is that the TN is an open-ended play,

in the sense that, due to daily transmission, it is subject to all kinds of influences. Therefore, the TN is a kind of fiction, written in serials, in such a way that each chapter is produced according to the work in progress and reception of the audience. Moreover, just the opposite happens in the United States, where *soap-operas* use less qualified actors and are directed to a specific audience, mainly women, who after finishing their daily routine have free afternoon hours at home, the Brazilian TN puts together the best actors, writers and directors, moving millions of television viewers. In this form, the TN is a link between the fantastic world of TV and the Brazilian social reality. Thanks to the daily transmission, the TN is at the same time similar to and capable of assimilating real life. T.S. Eliot wrote that the human mind cannot take too much reality. Thus, fiction here presented is so close to reality that it might even become more real than real life. The adaptation of the TN, as a cultural product, to the emotional necessities of the television audience, is one of the strongest reasons for its success.

As object of “psychological consumption,” the TN leads to an emotional outlet and to empathy. It explores characteristic themes of the popular imagination, and promotes an imaginary expansion of the real, establishing a slight frontier between fiction and reality. The TN deals with feelings like for instance easy emotions and sorrowful identification with somebody else’s sufferings. This daily *love story* seems already to be everlasting in the popular preference in Brazil. The televiewer chooses from the dramatic action of the TN, the parameters for the analysis of his own life, changing his behavior and modifying his habits. The theater has in the first place a good text; the cinema depends on the talent of the director; in the TN the actor-characters are responsible for its artistic as well as popular success.

At a first sight, in this form of popular dramatic art, we will find the following oppositions:

- (1) *telenovela* vs. novel (an opposition of two languages: television and literary);
- (2) novel vs. other programmes than TN (different kinds of TN);

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(3) *telenovela* vs. radionovel (transmission by different media of mass communication) (Moraña: 47-50).

Initially, in the TN we would have a situation of a specific discourse (1): the TN is divided into chapters (like the novel), but without a material possibility on the part of the receiver to be able to pass, by his own decision, from one chapter to another. The TN is broken up in three intervals (internal cuts), filled up by commercial advertisements; there is an interval of 24 hours between one chapter and the other and, finally, from Saturday to Monday, there is no TN. This fact alone shows that its rhythm of creation differs from all other kinds of discourse.

The origins of the TN are in the *feuilleton* of the XIX century. In Brazil, its predecessor is the radionovel, that started to decline in the 50's, when the first TV channel was introduced in Brazil, the TV Tupi of São Paulo. Thus, TN is a blend of two older forms of art and a modern one: the written *feuilleton*, the theater and the radio (Pignatari: 243). The first *telenovelas* had, in the beginning, the aspect of a theater play (*O Direito de Nascer*, TV Tupi, São Paulo, 1964). This language changed due to videotape, a technical improvement that allowed a greater perfection and brought TN very close to the cinematographic language.

TN gained prestige, winning the daily prime time (8 p.m.—*A moça que veio de longe*, TV Excelsior, São Paulo, 1950).

However, a new sensibility arises with *Beto Rockefeller* (TV Tupi, São Paulo, 1968), written by Bráulio Pedroso, who innovated the medium with a lot of realism. This TN dealt with a modern national theme, and was aided by external shots, that speeded up the narrative, and also showed the first anti-hero (or picaresque-hero) of the Brazilian TN. The dialogues were similar to daily conversation; the gestures became lively and the narrative put special stress on the Brazilian way of living in one of the country's big urban centers. From the world of pure fantasy, the TN moved to daily reality; the great heroes of the past gave place to the average man of Brazil, with his ambitions of social status, his daydreams of being accepted by and joining the *happy few* of fortune.

At this time, a powerful television broadcasting station arises,

the TV Globo. The TN would find in this the technical means and material resources for its expansion. For example, the settings might be located in any city in the world: *Carinhoso* (TV Globo, Rio de Janeiro, 1972) was performed in New York; *Baila Comigo* (TV Globo, Rio de Janeiro, 1981) takes the city of Lisbon for its background.

The result is indeed a new form of Brazilian narrative, of great popular impact and appeal. Brazilian TNs are now being shown in Portugal and in several Spanish speaking countries in Latin America. The Brazilian TN found its way when it took as a starting point the Brazilian culture, leaving aside imported cultural models. Culture is to be understood here in its anthropological sense, as man's processing of natural data and by the transformation of such data so it might be placed in a social relationship (Eco: 5).

For the correct understanding of the TN as a social phenomenon, it is necessary to consider the following aspects:

a) *production*: the criteria for choosing the themes; the script; characteristics of direction; actors' performance; scenery; illumination and photography; final setting, etc. The main production is the plot. The author of the TN has a different problem from that of the literary author. The book is a product; the TN is a process. The author writes a set of chapters (20 to 30), that are afterwards videotaped; as for the next block, it is elaborated according to: (1) statistical measurements of audience; (2) actors' performance (an inexperienced actor even if given a small part may, by his outstanding performance, become the leading actor of the cast); (3) censorship that is cultural and political inspection of any kind of order standing in a given moment. The rates of audience are the *feedback* that the viewer gives the broadcasting station and then on to the author. The TN has already been compared to a boat, floating in the sea, without destination. The audience is therefore the "co-pilot" because, in a certain way, it directs the show. Its reaction modifies the characters' destiny and determines even the abrupt end of a plot. The producer participates in the preparation of the TN, providing its funds and the technical team. Finally the director is the one in charge of the *mise-en-scène*. Thus, the TN is a joint creation of the author, the producer,

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the director, the actors and the audience; it is the result of the creative capacities of many people under a highly positive stimulus. The industrialization of this medium has the unquestionable merit of demanding, on the part of its production department, a planned and articulated work together with other departments of the television broadcasting station. For example, recommendations from the *marketing* department are very important, because the TN is also a form of commercial attraction. Due to the high monthly costs of its production, the station is forced to provide the adequate return of its investments opening spaces to commercial advertisement.

b) *distribution-consumption*: time of presentation (on average, a TN is shown over six months); time-slot (each novel presents a codification of its contents according to the transmission hour: at 7 p.m. everything is remote from reality and there is a greater fictional impact; at 8 p.m. there is a neorealistic intention and the characters are more believable, that is, psychologically more complex). Impact upon the audience is here taken into account;

c) *communicational characteristics of the TN*: language, structure, message, etc. The TN is a mirror of society; this society has a very complex structure, upon which men act with their ideas and attitudes.

When men create a system of ideas, they try to explain the social phenomena and the resulting facts. By means of ideas, men give a vision of the world to the agents of production, while the system of attitudes aims at a new form of relationship, that is, a collective form of behaviour among the social agents in their social activities. The combination of these two systems constitutes the ideology, the level of organization of the messages, which is ordinarily seen in both the form and content of the TN.

It is clear that the more successful *telenovelas* are the ones that raise questions and stress the social conflicts of our times, thus allowing the viewer an immediate self identification in what relates to time, action and space. It is a medium very rich in human expressions, and always providing cultural information and presenting social realities, such as the existence of classes and social functions, professions, values, life styles, habits, etc. So, the viewer finds himself in the rules of social

interaction established by the society in which he lives. In order to show all sorts of social relationships, the TN makes use of signs of daily reference to the televiewer, that is the average Brazilian man in his struggle between his aspirations and his real possibilities. It is unquestionable that actors, venerated by the audience, are apt to gain moral authority. Thus, they are the support—through the characters and parts they play—for the advancement of the country's cultural background. The TN tends to reinforce ethical and religious attitudes of the Brazilian society, as well as its tastes, life values and psychological inclinations.

One way of analysing the TN for all those who want to place themselves in a critical position, is that put forth by Algirdas J. Greimas. Any TN can be analysed if one takes its characters as a starting point. Each character is a social *actor*, and a set of *actors* can perform the same *function*. So, as an example, we can mention three actors in charge of positive functions: to help one's neighbour, to do good deeds, to act in order to bring aid to somebody else. This set of actors is called an *actant*, because they have characteristics that are common to all of them. A TN, as any text, can have at least six *actants*:

A₁—subject or hero; A₂—objects of the will; A₃—determiner, addresser; A₄—addressee, receiver or determined; A₅—adjutant or helper and A₆—opponent or traitor. In other words, the action of a certain TN may start by somebody (A₁), who wants to obtain something (A₂), material or not; in order to reach his purpose, he himself or another person performs the action (A₃), that will do good to somebody else (A₄), be it himself or the community. In order to obtain what he wants, he will be aided (A₅), but will also find obstacles (A₆).

An *actor* can assume one or several roles at the same time and be put in relation with other *actors*. This relation can be simple, when there are only two elements. In a relation, the elements can have common characteristics (conjunction) or opposite ones (disjunction). The disjunction exists according to its contrary or contradiction: between *black* and *white*, the colour is the common mark; at the same time as *white* is the opposite of *black*, the contradiction of *white* is *non-white* (any other colour, or even bluish white). An actor can be *honest*, and an-

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other one be *dishonest*. Both of them can become *non-honest*, which would mean the contradiction of the initial qualification. This shows the "game of masks," the exchange of roles, the modification of *actants*. The description will reveal common unconscious reactions, unnoticeable upon a superficial inspection.

The relations range from simple to complex ones. These relations can be:

1) relations of social *status* (which are those that indicate professions, property, material ambitions and leisure);

2) relations between characters, with prevalence of sentimental themes, such as lack of affection, family relations and love relations;

3) relations between facts and narrative;

4) relations concerning the characters' behavior;

5) relations of groups, that is, inter and intrarelationship of large or small social groups (Rodrigues: 98-100).

From the point-of-view of the structure, due to the mobility of the camera, the elementary model of the TN is based on dichotomies: there are spatial oppositions and life style oppositions. The camera moves from one place to another; each space is characterized by a group of characters of a certain social class and age, facing a specific problem.

Every TN starts with an apparently organized situation, which, in a second moment, reveals the existence of critical and troublesome relations, to reach a solution for the conflicts at the end, or, at least, indicate it. Three stages can here be distinguished: organization—disorganization—reorganization. The third moment represents harmony between the elements, the absence of any problematic situation and the presence of positive values. This course is established according to the essential values of each society, according to its ethical-moral code. The transgression of the code causes discomfort and conflict. The tendency of society is to reaffirm its values and to present them as if they were a "natural" consequence of the organized situations, in order to prove that their transgression will also bring as a "natural" consequence a state of unhappiness.

A priceless value is the family. As to the value of "happiness," it prevails over "wealth," although one goes together with

the other. This shows us the existence of a system of stereotyped social values, like the idea of the “good conquering evil,” which justifies the social rules and satisfies society’s expectations. The good wins, love prevails and so the balance is reestablished. The transgressors are punished and the spectators can return merrily to their daily work...

Communication is here due to immediate identification with reality. The TN communicates what the televiewer wants it to communicate. For this reason, the success of the TN is widespread and easily explainable. Massification occurs through the use of data to which the televiewer gives immediate recognition. They have the strength of all built images.

Therefore, creativity is something very relative. The author of a TN not only worries about the plot, but also about the visual and auditory complements that go along with it. He writes the dialogue, gives clues for the visual composition, the scenery and the actors’ movements. He then establishes a direct communication, for the TN is a process and, thus, may suffer continuous modifications. In order to determine the psychological development of the characters, the author works together with the scene director, who is always very busy in shooting five to six chapters a week (they are blocks of several chapters each time, not only one), and tends to become a technical executive, no more, in some cases, than a member of the staff.

So, we can see that the *telenovela* is a *text*, developed into a discourse, that is, an ordered set of material forms (images in movement, music, etc.). This text has two main aspects: the *story* and the *audiovisual language*. The *story* tells what happens in the TN’s world of fiction. The audiovisual language is characterized by the shots. Each shot is a continuous image, from the beginning of the camera’s movement until the end of it.

Creativity exists, then, in relation to the exploitation of visual, auditory and verbal elements. The visual sign is treated in a different way according to the content of each time slot, as said before. At 7 p.m. illusion prevails. The camera avoids *closes*. This is the time children watch TV and censorship calls for the avoidance of social and domestic problems, such as adultery. People look neat, there are no scenes of misery and the houses are tidy. Television in a subliminal process, exercises a didactic

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function. Poverty is shown with dignity and its positive aspects are emphasized; for instance in a scene a neatly-kept room will be chosen for filming in order to serve as a model.

In the 8 p.m. time slot, neo-realism sets in. An unfriendly atmosphere is created around the villain, and a *kitsch* mansion for the new rich. The auditory sign is added to the image. For each of the main characters, a specific musical theme is developed, thanks to well-known composers and musicians. The success of the *telenovela* will put the music trail on the *hit parade*, and it will be the assurance of high selling rates. In the case of sound effects, the lack of them creates *suspense*; changes in sounds anticipate the coming of an important event.

We see that the TN has, at the same time, realistic characteristics (transposition of the daily occurrence to the screen), consumption characteristics as it makes the viewer adhere to fashion presented, making him buy whatever is exhibited in TV commercials or even practice a certain kind of sport. A TN which is going on in 1981, *Baila Comigo*, by showing a dance studio, invites the spectator to physical fitness and also to the purchase of sporting equipment. Finally, the mythical characteristic of the *telenovela* should be noted: people of a high intellectual level usually subscribe to the esthetic proposals underlying the discourse.

On the other hand there is redundancy—obvious forms of communication, of exaggerated emphasis, of repetition. "This resource favours both linearity and instantaneousness of communication; therefore, it is widely used in the mass media. It is a new flowing, a renewal, a new passage of communication along its own course or along a course already proved by the receiver's sensibility. The resource will always be a form of imitation, because what is there presented is always represented, even with originality, art and invention" (Távola: 247).

These brief comments on the Brazilian TN showed us that as a phenomenon of social communication, it can be analysed from different aspects. The TN is a complex "signifying mechanism," a material construction that generates meaning.

This is one way of seeing the object. But what we really have before us are several "objects": the whole is always manifold. Herewith, we want to call attention to the fact that the point-

of-view, the place in which we put ourselves will create the object. If we start from the content, we will come to the *message*; if, on the contrary, we choose the *total structure*, the inner game of several forms and contents, seen as signifying mechanisms (codes, languages, ideologies), we will generate another message, that is, the TN will be a theoretical construction produced from another point-of-view. The important thing is to see the “object” critically and to be able to explain it.

As to the televiewer, his participation is either *playful* or *cathartic*. For him, the TN will be an interesting game of human feelings, all of easy assimilation, of low intellectual demand and of emotional abundance. He may not be very much worried about the psychological coherence of the characters, as he seeks dreams and amusement to escape from the hard, negative and threatening daily reality. He is eager to see on the screen primary feelings and basic impulses of the human being, like passion, delirium and rupture with the so-called normal life. The taste for the commonplace, the world of the middle class in Brazil’s urban centers, with its dramas and aspirations, the exaggerated sentimentalism that characterizes this kind of animated *feuilleton*, has a great popular appeal in Brazil. For example, several TN had their script based on the myth of Cinderella. This is the communicational impact of the TN: a more-or-less conscious search for social ascension, going beyond the conditions and limitations of one’s class. It is a daily dream to be dreamed.

There is no doubt that the magic part of the TN has to do with its presentation in the form of serials, a successful form for many years. In Brazil the TN, according to some critics, is arriving at a point of saturation; some others think the medium is being renewed little by little, keeping its appeal. In 1978, the TV Globo (Rio de Janeiro) presented the TN *Espelho Mágico/Coquetel de Amor*, a daring experiment of the writer of the day, Lauro César Muniz.

It was a *telenovela* about the TN, an interesting counterpoint of the reality and fiction, in which the intimate life of the authors, actors and directors was shown. *Espelho Mágico* (Magic Mirror) was the screen, the television machine, *Coquetel de Amor* (Love Cocktail) was a critical reference to a common feeling in all TNs, as if the medium was surprised by the

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trained romanticism. The spectator was surprised by the absence of a lineal story, the reception was negative and there was a statical decrease in audience. *Telenovela* is *telenovela*.

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