

Television beyond itself in Latin America¹

A televisão além de si mesma na América Latina

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ABSTRACT

Television in Latin America continues to be an important medium for the population; politics, history, the market, and especially the culture and its audiences keep television alive. In spite of the fact that millennials enjoy television from several screens, television contents remain as a reference in everybody's audiovisual experiences. With changes in its reception, production, programming, and business models, television *booms*, instead of disappearing, amplifying itself into the televisual medium, keeping itself as a multicultural experience, and as a unique opportunity for its audiences' *reinvention* of themselves.

Keywords: Television, miscegenation, magical realism, solitude, culture

RESUMO

Na América Latina, a televisão continua sendo um meio de comunicação importante; a história, a política, o mercado e, principalmente, toda a cultura e audiência são o que a mantém viva. Apesar de os jovens estarem migrando para outras telas, os conteúdos da televisão continuam sendo referência nas experiências audiovisuais de todos. Com as mudanças na recepção, na produção, na programação e nos modelos de negócio, a televisão, em vez de desaparecer, *explode* e se amplia no televisivo como experiência múltipla e oportunidade de *reinvenção* de suas audiências.

Palavras-chave: Televisão, realismo mágico, cultura, América Latina, audiência, mestiçagem

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UNDERSTANDING TELEVISION OR any other media today presupposes much more than just explaining its technological, business model, or political evolution, despite the dazzle caused by inventions and digital gadgets, new business models and the various agreements, pacts and modalities between the public and the private and between the global and the local around the world (Maxwell; Miller, 2014; Miller, 2016). The contemporary “boom” of television, in addition to diversifying, transforming, and broadening its forms of existence, has amplified the idea of television itself towards something different and unheard-of, as a converging source of the audiovisual or televisual medium, in such a way that many people thought it was going to disappear; that is why contrasting and even schizophrenic debates have arisen about the end of television (Buonanno, 2015; Scolari, 2016).

Beyond that international debate in which television is assumed as a medium that is in transition and soon to disappear, in this study we start from the provocative conviction that television, as any other media, is “more than one thing at the same time.” And we emphasize many aspects, because most of discourses on the threatened existence of television focus almost exclusively on its media-technological dimension, which is clearly being surpassed by smart screens with strong preference among the audiences. Television is also a source of entertainment, information, acculturation, and dissemination of political, advertising, and educational messages.

We acknowledge that television is undergoing a transition, but not an extinction process; rather, it is coexisting with other screens and becoming once again a transcendental and versatile medium, not only because of its intrinsic properties as a medium and its growing convergence on many devices, but especially because of the particular characteristics of the regions and cultures where it operates and is inserted. Therefore, in this study we propose *perceiving television beyond itself*, from the particular region that is Latin America, which is historically, culturally, and politically unique; because it is only from there that we believe it is possible to understand its polychromatic link and its profound meaning to all Latin-Americans. This is a meaning not only grasped by the television screen, but one that is created and recreated before it, among its audiences in its varied interaction with contents, within the televisual medium, and with its own history and culture (Orozco, 2016). To do so, we propose here an analytical perspective that is rather unusual in the literature on audiovisual media, one that focuses on certain elements that are not always evident by themselves; yet, they denote their existence manifesting in several subtle manners, and not directly, as many of the most profound elements of Latin-American culture.

THE OLD NOVELTY OF THE LATIN-AMERICAN REGION

Latin America is, at the same time, the most and the least postcolonial region in the world. It is the most postcolonial region because it obtained such status before most parts of Asia and Africa. And it is the least postcolonial region because it continues to be dominated by the two languages of its former colonizers (Spanish and Portuguese) and there is a growing and conflictive “interdependence” with the “other” American and the English language, which is invasive, whereas the different autochthonous, indigenous languages that were spoken by the region’s natives before the conquest are unrecognized, although many of these languages are in dire danger of extinction.

In Latin America, the notion of magical realism closely related to Latin-American literature and art, defines and comprises a large part of its expression of tradition and modernity; and as we propose here, it permeates the exchange between televisual fiction and the audiences.

Magical realism coincides with the official and vernacular ideologies of the continent on *miscegenation*, or the *mestizo*, as a testimony of a “shared” history of invasion, sexual violence, and slavery that dates back hundreds of years. However, miscegenation in Latin America is not, nor could it be, a general description of a successful, inclusive, and popular multiculturalism; yet, we do not intend for it to be a neuter definition either.

Much of the amazement of many people, Latin-American audiences “actively interact” with the mass, vertical television, and, in particular with its fiction contents. They creatively produce new understandings of their own world and of themselves with it, in which there is room for new stories, illusions, and expectations for a better world, one that would be especially theirs, which they share with their social groups during collective viewing, just when the telenovela chapters have finished on the screen.

In the Latin-American region, television does not necessarily converge, but rather synchronically multiplies. It is a television that expands and assumes huge proportions with technological breakthroughs, and instead of excluding itself, it acquires new forms, without losing all the previous ones. Like Pokémon characters: *Pocket Monsters*, which have a set of attributes that they display in their different interactions with the others, but there is always one or several original attributes that remain, making them keeping their distinctiveness (Orozco, 2016).

Regarding the coexistence of television with the other media, García-Canclini (2008: 390) states that:

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La fusión de los multimedios se correlaciona con cambios en el consumo cultural. Por lo tanto, enfoques macrosociológicos también necesitan una mirada antropológica, una perspectiva más cualitativa, para comprender cómo modos de acceso, bienes culturales y formas de comunicación se están reorganizando.

Then, we understand that technological innovation typically derives from social relations and cultural forms that condition the selection, investment, and development of media (Williams, 1989). Thus, the relation becomes reciprocal. The latest reorganization entails a multiple forms; therefore, one could hardly speak of the end of television, a medium that has been the largest audiovisual entertainment industry and the source of information in the region for the last six decades.

Latin-American people are watching more television than ever before. For example: the average Peruvian spends nine hours a day in front of different screens enjoying a variety of formats. In Brazil the number accounts for eight hours, and in Mexico, seven (Milward Brown, 2014). That is, one third of a person's life.

Of course, the number of hours is not the only significant factor. In qualitative terms, audiences mix several TV options: established genres such as telenovelas and drama series; professional and amateur videos; sports, mainly soccer; and films that can be industrial or artisanal (Smith, 2014). Concerning contemporary audiences, it is crucial to understand the way people watch the screens in a continuum and as a social as well as televisual practice (Orozco, 1996). According to Benamou's proposals (2009: 152):

El melodrama televisivo (el mundo de las telenovelas, en este caso) no solo es un lugar donde tensiones entre lo nacional, lo local y lo global se articulan y se ponen de manifiesto, es también un puente comunicativo que une espectadores a través de esferas nacionales, regionales ampliadas y globales de transmisión y recepción, trabajando para dar forma a nuevas comunidades culturales e interculturales.

Televidencia – the process of watching television – , the daily interaction with the TV screen, has several implications on the everyday life in terms of activities and emotions, and it is the scenario of the historical *compadrazgo* between television and its audiences (Orozco, 2014b). Audiences grasp from television a variety of messages and standards about paternal and pedagogical roles in such a way they affect everything, from the organization of domestic life to the behavior at school and in the everyday life. Just like those quite illiterate mothers who advise their daughters “to watch TV” to learn to behave in society and especially to learn how to deal with their boyfriends (Orozco, 2001). *Televidencia* also establishes complicity between:

La oralidad que perdura como experiencia cultural primaria de las mayorías, y la visualidad tecnológica, esa forma de ‘oralidad secundaria’ que tejen y organizan las gramáticas tecnoperceptivas de la radio, el cine, el video y la televisión (comunicación oral que domina lo cotidiano, como parte del crecimiento, y la comunicación oral secundaria, que deriva de escuchar y ver radio, cine, video y televisión) (Martín-Barbero; Rey, 1999: 34)

In Latin America, such as in many other places, distinctions between the use of a variety of screens and types of service are incomplete and slow. Rather, there is a flow through the categories, with differences established as social practices instead of technological essences (Verón, 2009). The latest data also corroborate that Latin-Americans watch television, *with others*, mostly due to their need to share resources in an area where wealth is very unequally distributed (Ceron, 2015), and also because it is there, in the exchange among the audience members, where the meaning of what is viewed on the screen is created. Of the more than 600 million citizens in Latin America, approximately half have connected to the Internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2016, 2017). Mexico, the largest and most influential Spanish-speaking country, has 70 million Internet users, which accounts for 63% of the Mexican population (Asociación de Internet.mx, 2017).

According to the *Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe* (Rojas; Poveda, 2015) the proportion of Latin-Americans with regular access to the broadband more than doubled between 2006 and 2013, from 20.7% to 46.7%. But these figures can be deceptive: being online at some point in our lives or in a given year is completely different from enjoying broadband on a daily basis, and there is a dramatic variation in this sense among nations in the region. In addition, is poorly compared with the 79% average of the *Organización para la Cooperación y Desarrollo Económico* (The Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development, OCDE). On the other hand, the quality of broadband in Latin America is poor when compared with that from, for example, Sweden and Japan, which decreases the citizens’ capacity to download and transmit to a great bandwidth.

Such fact has obvious implications for not replacing television as an information-distribution system (Organización para la Cooperación y Desarrollo Económico-OCDE, 2012). And whereas the use of smart phones has exponentially increased in the last five years, only a minority of them are connected to high-quality broadband (to 3G, let alone 5G) (Millward Brown, 2014; Qualcomm..., 2015). Furthermore, there are great inequalities in terms of prices in the region. A megabit per second in Mexico costs \$9 dollars, or 1% of the average monthly income; in Bolivia it costs \$63 dollars, or 31% respectively.

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And access is unequally structured in terms of race, occupation, and region; indigenous people represent one third of the rural workers in Latin America and more than half in some countries, but they are essentially disconnected. The digital gap between indigenous people and the rest of the population in Mexico is 0.3, in Panama, 0.7; and in Venezuela, 0.6 (Bianchi, 2015).

Hence the complexity and, at the same time, the potential, due to the major and opposing differences comprised in a notion such as miscegenation, to explain television. This is a notion that, at once, illuminates and darkens the way in which, for example, ideas of racial and cultural amalgamation can be seen as badges of pride, but inequalities encompassed by them remain today precisely due to racial and cultural differences. And that extraordinary irony of miscegenation is grasped in the everyday lives of the majorities in the Latin-American region, where television is actively present.

Unlike telephones, tablets and laptops, large screens – mostly *Smart TV screens* – generally have well-defined locations in the household, but not like the old TV sets of yore, which were similar to furniture. The new screens in Latin-American countries tend to be mounted on the walls, not like works of art, but rather positioned to facilitate the joint viewing of the family as a whole; that is, to make it easier to have a collective experience of *televidencia*. And beyond the domestic environment, large TV sets are prominent in the public space, such as in shopping malls, bars, restaurants, subway stations in the main cities, and even in the markets (Repoll, 2014).

Latin-Americans who can afford a screen usually purchase the newest ones in the World Cup period, which is held every four years (Notimex, 2012). They manifest their great passion for soccer and other sports by watching them on large screens and in bars and other collective places such as the classic American sports bar (García, 2010; McCarthy, 1995; Wenner, 1998).

Going out to watch a soccer match or a baseball game on a large screen evokes the same commitment and pleasure as being in the movie theater to watch a film, and in this region it is a predominant way of consuming sports on the screen. Apart from Argentina, where 80% of the population has paid television, the majority in other countries does not have access to this type of television in their households (Ceron, 2015). In Mexico, paid television was hardly the privilege of a little over a third of the total population for years. And in 2016 the number of viewers of some type of paid television system was barely 55% (Observatorio Iberoamericano de la Ficción Televisiva-Obitel, 2016)².

These viewing contexts do not replace the classical way of watching television at home, but rather work as supplements that combine entertainment, socialization, and tastes. Television, in general, whether in the domestic or in the public

² Argentina is also different because during most of the Kirchner political dynasty, from 2000 to 2015, the State assumed the responsibility of broadcasting soccer matches via free TV signals (Mariotto, 2015).

contexts, is mainly a source of emotionally-active mental and sensory entertainment (Daswani, 2015; Observatório Iberoamericano de la Ficción Televisiva, 2015).

THE *REINVENTION* OF LATIN-AMERICAN TELEVISION

Television in Latin America is not only determined by technologies, as we have discussed, or by schedules and types of programming, but also by the audiences' tastes and interpretations, for whom the screen text becomes the pretext for communication and coexistence. Everyday life becomes an effervescent mixture with the telenovelas, just like magical realism, turning the programs and life experiences into a combination of fiction and facts, with blurry divisory lines. Watching television, then, is turned into a haven for many Latin-Americans where they can feel emotions, cry, and laugh at ease, without any social consequences and reflect on the inequality that damages so much the alleged unity provided by miscegenation (Orozco, 2001). The Colombian magical realism writer and Nobel Prize Winner Gabriel García Márquez entitled his memoirs *Vivir para contarla* (2002). Life in Latin America is mostly seen as a narrative that is told and reinvented every time there is an opportunity to retell it, and it makes use of themes of fiction stories to organize, reorganize, and enrich itself in the face of the extraordinary suffering, injustice, and inequality of the majorities. This (imagined, beloved, invented) magical realism is a stark contrast with, for example, the British empiricism or US pragmatism, which assume a firm certainty that truth can be learned in a form that is unadorned by fiction. The cultural difference is, actually, a means to represent both the profound mixture of culture and language and the way in which pain and exploitation are experienced so unequally.

From the Cuban revolutionary *radionovela* (soap opera broadcasted by radio) and its expansion throughout Latin America, telenovelas have turned into opportunities to invent stories, to imagine lives, to seek deliverance, to punish the baddies, to participate in the reinterpretation, to encourage personal encounters, and to seek new forms of communication.

Unknowingly and without intending to leave a televisual or audiovisual record, Latin-American audiences have been permanently creating "transmedia" expansions. This symbiosis between audiences and telenovelas lives on beyond the moment of watching a screen; it has gained expression in private and public life, with relatives, neighbors, and coworkers (Martín-Barbero et al., 1992). What happens on television is transformed into the audiences', if not legal, then cultural property, since they process information, relating it with their own lives and conferring new meanings to it (Orozco, 2014a).

Fiction on television is the one genre that attracts both the most financial investment and the most audiences. This investment is not just via production and advertising costs. It also takes the form of product placement and political and commercial propaganda within the stories (Orozco; Franco, 2011). Venezuela under Chavism and Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – PRI) are prototypes of such investment. For example, propaganda expenditures in fiction in Mexico, which we could label as “political *merchandising*,” surpassed 205 million dollars in 2012; much more than political parties spent in formal publicity in their campaigns (Fundar Centro de Análisis e Investigación, 2015).

As in other regions, television in Latin America is diversifying its products and the ways to access them, making their programs available from smart phones, and creating the new genre of very short *webnovelas* that preserve the emotional intensity of their predecessors, but adapting it to the format in such a way to make them compatible with the audiences’ current circumstances, devices, and expectations. But for the popular classes, the old model continues to be the most important one (Orozco et al., 2012).

The combination of advertising and propaganda in fiction shows is a response to the citizens-audiences’ fascination with the fiction genre and industry, as reported in academic studies on the impact of telenovelas on audiences (Clifford, 2005; Igartua; Vega, 2014; Slade; Beckenham, 2005).

Yo soy Bety, la fea, a Colombian telenovela remade, thanks to the sale of the format, in the USA as *Ugly Betty* and in Mexico as *La fea más bella*, exemplifies these tendencies. A week before the 2006 presidential elections in Mexico, *La fea más bella* presented the following dialog: “Who are you going to vote for? I will vote for Felipe Calderón.” Beyond the screen, Calderón won the subsequent election (Orozco; Franco, 2011). This historical example emphasizes both the supremacy of orality (in comparison with visual forms) even within the telenovela itself, and magical realism as a mixture that can be produced both by the audiences and the TV network.

Certainly this anecdote does not indicate the mass compliance with an instruction, which is not the way merchandising works. It rather has to do with creating an atmosphere of normalcy, either by purchasing a given product or voting in a certain manner.

THE SOLITUDES OF LATIN AMERICA

Miscegenation and magical realism are intermingled with *solitude*, an idea and concept that we have taken here from two of the most illustrious titles in

Latin-American literature canon, *El laberinto de la Soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude), written in 1950 by the Mexican awarded with a Literature Nobel Prize, Octavio Paz (1950), who recognized and embodied a tragic meaning of that “unfulfilled desire” that has haunted citizens across Latin America, and *Cien años de soledad* (A Hundred Years of Solitude), the novel with which Gabriel García Márquez became famous in the late 1960’s and which made magical realism world-famous, as a way of narrating and living. In this regard, Martín-Barbero (2002) has rephrased it as a metaphor of the century of solitude to suggest that, since the “independence” of Latin America in the second decade of the 19th century, not one but two hundred years of solitude have been endured. These “solitudes” can also be explained by the insufficient and deficient communication among Latin-American countries and among their different social groups, leading to a history of internal and external violence. The two hundred years of solitude have been characterized by massacre after massacre, dictatorship after dictatorship. The region has been plagued by merciless authoritarian regimes at different times in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Paraguay. In the last century, the “Operación Cóndor” in Chile, and the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico eroded the Latin-Americans’ perspectives and hopes across the region, especially among the young.

The Zapatista Movement, which emerged on January 1st 1994 in Mexico, coinciding with the emergence of the first North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, The United States, and Canada, could have been “another America”; it was announced, but it soon succumbed. Though the Zapatistas surprised the country, the continent and then the world with a tremendous display of indigenous wisdom accumulated over these 200 years of solitude and isolation, that was made known for the first time beyond its original territory, it was through the Internet that the avant-garde written press made itself known, and not via television. The Mexican government prohibited the Mexican television from publicizing the Zapatistas through their cameras or microphones by virtue of a written order issued by the Ministerio de Gobernación (Orozco, 1994).

THE FICTION INTENDED TO BE REALITY AND THE REALITY THAT ONLY TURNS INTO FICTION

Amidst the solitude, there comes a dream of collective prosperity. Fiction, then, turns into a stimulus to dream of a different world, where the unreal can become real at will (Orozco, 2014a). It is a possible way out of the labyrinth, through catharsis, crying side by side with the telenovela heroine without feeling silly or guilty, identifying oneself with the criminal of a police series without

the fear of being arrested and imprisoned, or yelling with pleasure when one's favorite soccer player scores, without being able to kick the ball oneself.

TV fiction and sport embody and encourage an abundance of dreams, desires, and identifications in the intersection between reality and the screen. Martín-Barbero and Rey claim that "Si la televisión atrae es porque la calle expulsa, es de los miedos que viven los medios" (1999, p. 29). They skillfully question the given way in which media monopolists satisfy their audiences' textual tastes, thus satisfying the Latin-Americans' innate cultural needs. This is rather what neoclassical economists would call "limited rationality" (Simon, 1978); very far from giving what is actually wanted: in this case, a safe way out of the labyrinth.

But Martín-Barbero and Rey (1999) also state that television has had a positive influence as a decisive actor on political change in Latin America, providing new ways of "making" politics. The "No" campaign in Chile, in 1988, is an example. When the opportunity arose to reject Dictator Augusto Pinochet, who sought popular legitimacy by a plebiscite to counteract global condemnation of systematic abuse of human rights by mass imprisonments, torture, and murder, the propaganda campaign was won by the left. The nation was divided evenly when the campaign started, which ended with the triumph of the opposition, based largely on their televisual promotional material (Khazan, 2013; National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 1988).

The vote was an approval of democracy, joy, and self-expression; Pablo Larraín, a Chilean film maker, immortalized the triumph in his film *NO* (2012), highlighting the role of communication and television, starring the Mexican actor Gail García Bernal³.

Something similar happened in Mexico in the 1970s resulting from several telenovelas produced by the former theater director and TV executive Miguel Sabido, which were broadcast by Televisa. They were conceived as telenovelas with a message or "telenovelas de refuerzo social" (Cueva et al., 2011). The issues approached included, among others, birth control and literacy. The objectives demonstrated that of the 10 million adult Mexicans who were illiterate at that time, one million soon registered to take the literacy classes implemented by Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) after watching the telenovela *Ven Conmigo* (1975). And after *Acompáñame* (1977), 562,464 people started using contraceptives, almost one third more than before its release (Garnica, 2011).

In the last five years, *prime time* in most Latin-American countries has been dominated by regionally produced telenovelas (Vassallo; Orozco, 2014). Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina are the main producers, while Uruguay, Ecuador, and Chile have also entered the market (Observatorio Iberoamericano de la Ficción Televisiva, 2014). The *Observatorio Iberoamericano para la Ficción*

³ See: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2059255/>>. Access on: Dec. 10, 2018.

Televisiva (Obitel) has shown that national fiction television, in every region, characteristically attracts the highest ratings across Latin America. This has been theorized as a function of the audiences' preferences of cultural proximity when it is available (Sinclair; Straubhaar, 2013).

The success of such nearness does not necessarily go against the permanent power of the USA as a TV content exporter in the region, due to its capacity to fix prices below the costs of the local material, to make use of high production values, and aim at specialized cable and satellite channels (Miller, 2010).

THE TELEVISION THAT LIVES ON AS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE THE REALM OF THE TELEVISUAL MEDIUM

Surely, we are in a new era. Television, the cinema, the radio, and the press continue to play important roles, even when they are struggling for their co-existence and against domination with new screens, technologies and, foremost, new “*figuras de razón*” of communication (Martin-Barbero, 2001). This new era has been labeled as “post-television”; but the main authors, such as Buonanno (2015), differ when they admit that television makes its way in a new constellation of communications, that is –we would say – in the contemporary media and televisual scenario (Press; Williams, 2010).

In a comparative analysis of the two key points of view about the end of television: the euro-centric and the Latin-American one, Argentine researcher Carlón (2012) concludes that, while the Eurocentrist stand emphasizes the end of television; the Latin-American vision highlights the possibility of a new, longer life for the televisual medium, despite the fact that its production, distribution, and consumption are changing. The previous hegemony of television as the cultural machine of everyday life can be facing now the competition of other devices, but is still a protagonist “*programadora de la vida social*”.

Although authors that represent the Anglo-Saxon approach, such as Katz (2009) (see also Carey, 2005; Carlón; Scolari, 2014; Friedman, 2013; Piscitelli, 2010), *underscore* technological breakthroughs as the main causes for the changes in television, Latin-American authors pay more attention to the social practices that favor TV audiences (Orozco, 2014c; Orozco; Miller, 2016).

We think that beyond its political-economic basis, the success of television lies in its essentialist ontology: people believe in the evidence presented on the screen. In it, they glimpse the spoken and seen reality, allied, paradoxically, to the fantasy world of television and its openness to the viewers' self-insertion (Orozco, 2014c). The classically denotative, apparently non-interpretative

notion of television reality continues to be valid (Scolari, 2013; Hall, Hobson, Lowe; Willis, 1980).

This experience has reached its peak in the last two decades, both in Latin America and in Western Europe and the USA. Accordingly, the population has been the object of “audienciación”⁴ (turning into audiences) in ways that alter the rest of the everyday life (Orozco, 1996). Being an audience means connecting with others in a way mediated by the screens, which makes us know not the object itself, but its representation on the screen.

These forms of knowledge are now mixed, and they continue as “auto comunicación de masas” (Castells, 2009). What was previously a centralized form of communication still matters, but it can be personalized for more individual experiences. This new tendency causes new forms of experiencing the televisual medium to coexist with old forms of mass media-audiences relations, and its textuality and cultural resonance in the Americas, we believe, will be decided mostly by their audiences’ magical realism, miscegenation, and “solitudes,” just as it has historically been. ■

⁴This concept was first proposed by Orozco (2001) and it has been revived by Livingstone (2015).

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