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The Secret Door: Reception Aesthetics of Telenovela

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*1 Introduction

During the last thirty years, telenovelas have become the object of a vast body of research from quantitative audience surveys to qualitative sociological, economic, political, ideological and semiotic investigations, including discourse analyses, communication and ethnographical studies. Brazilians have pioneered research in this genre since the late sixties¹ followed by scholars in other Latin American countries.² Telenovela's sister genre, soap opera, has also received theoretical attention within Anglo-American and European academic circles.³

Approximately during the same period of time, a shift of focus took place in the field of aesthetics, particularly in literary studies, that turned attention from traditional author-text analyses towards the process of reception and the readers' interpretative competence. The change of emphasis from authorial intentions or texts' syntactic and semantic configuration to response and interpretation, known as reception aesthetics, was initiated by the school of Konstanz with Iser and Jauss, later followed by Wolff, Todorov, Eco and Fish. Their main purpose was to arrive at the true meaning of a literary text through an inquiry of its historical, sociological and psychological constituents. Jauss attempted to integrate intra-literary and social "horizons of expectations" and to distinguish the "text's effect of concretion" from the "readers' conditioned concretion". Iser's "ideal or implicit reader"

founded by the text itself, Wolff's "presumed reader" and Eco's "model reader" are anticipated by the author through a display of textual strategies that enable full actualization of the text's meaning. Todorov's 1970 "optimal reader" and Stanley Fish's "interpretative communities" of informed readers are other versions of reception theories.

Aesthetic reception was exported beyond the field of literary studies and applied particularly to communication and media studies. Naturally, many investigations on telenovela have taken an approach based on reception but, strangely enough, they all have left the aesthetics on the side. The reason for this theoretical vacancy is partly due to mainstream aestheticians' prejudice against products of cultural industry and partly to the difficulties of applying standard aesthetic criteria, values and categories to mass arts. In the field of aesthetics, mass art and cultural industries have captured the attention of only a few specialists such as Collingwood, Adorno, Greenberg, Benjamin, Shusterman, Gracyk, Carroll and, with very few exceptions, mostly from a critical, unsympathetic perspective.

Objections might be raised concerning the relevance of analyzing an object that appears to have meager aesthetic value. These objections may be equally raised towards the relevance of analyzing avant-garde artworks that obviously have a meager audience and are confined to the exclusive minority of artworld specialists. For similar reasons, none of these objections hold, as one may be justified by the quality and complexity of their objects and the other by the quantity and variety of viewers involved. One is left to wonder why, despite the idiomatic jargon and local character of some telenovelas like *Rosa Salvaje*, this genre has caused such an uproar in countries as remote as China and Russia, and whether there is more than meets the disdainful eye in this peculiar form of narrative.

My purpose, then, is not precisely tutoring telenovela appreciation nor justifying its aesthetic value according to mainstream aesthetics' standards. Telenovelas by definition

need no training for appreciation and their aesthetic value is as obvious to its fans as it is negligible to its detractors. I do not intend to legitimate nor disqualify telenovela as an artform but simply to explore it. The question I will address here concerns the mode of aesthetic reception of telenovelas, the way this genre is appropriated by its spectators, the reasons for its success and the manners in which it allures its public. What kind of relations are established by the audience with the telenovela and what effects, behaviors and modes of appreciation are generated by it? How are the horizons of expectation settled in regards to this genre and how do they, in turn, condition the audience's response to telenovelas? In short, my point will not be to prove the inferiority or superiority of this artform in relation to cultivated arts but to examine its difference and understand the modes of aesthetic appreciation that are specific to this genre.

*2. Mass arts and fine arts

Production of mass art is a kind of cultural engineering with well calculated effects and revenues. Cultural industrial production does not differ significantly from other forms of industrial production in estimating investment and benefits for the producers, bringing about new needs in potential consumers and providing objects for their satisfaction, wrapping commodities in an attractive guise, carefully weighing novelty against conventionality, incorporating and generating fashion trends and organizing extensive marketing campaigns for their products.

In fine or cultivated arts we are dealing with artworks or texts that are created by a clearly defined author who projects a position within a particular field or artworld and an attitude towards the subject and the genre itself, both subverting and preserving part of its deep-rooted conventions. Fine arts are intertextual, singular and seek permanence.⁴ Mass arts, on the other hand, are fragmentary, assembled, multiple and seek instantaneous success. They

are preserved in a template that enables reproduction but are designed for immediate and massive consumption.

Artworks are produced privately in a studio and then presented in restricted public spaces to a cultivated audience; their process of circulation is from private to public spaces. The code or language in which artists communicate is required to be highly original and creative. The reception of avant-garde arts is contemplative, disinterested, exclusive and distinctive, as Bourdieu has pointed out. Taste for fine arts requires training and knowledge of the particular aesthetic code because artworks always allude, in various degrees, to preceding art and are subtly or openly self referential and intertextual. Artworks attempt to explore and create new forms of sensibility and new ways of non conceptual understanding. An artist has a relatively clear idea of the public he or she addresses, at least on the short term, which is constituted by members of the artworld.

Mass art, on the other hand, is produced in public working spaces (recording studios and locations) and generally consumed in private spaces by devices such as televisions or audio equipment.⁵ Mass arts are addressed to an anonymous aggregate who share a "common-denominator" in terms of taste and expectations (Neuman 1991,13). There is no single author at work but a team of people with highly specialized skills, each focusing on particular aspects of the production. Rather than unity, as was the case of cultivated artworks, mass art is an assemblage of fragments. It is easily accessible and carefully calculated for the widest circulation possible, produced in series rather than single format and it appeals not for its distinctive character but for the opposite, its merging potential.

Mass arts require effortless recognition and aim at the public's sentiments rather than sensibility, whereas avant-garde arts, as Noël Carroll puts it, "are designed to thwart ready

assimilation. In the most benign cases, avant-garde artworks are intended to stretch common sensibilities". In Carroll's definition:

x is a mass artwork if and only if 1) x is a multiple instance or type artwork 2) produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3) which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (e.g. narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of relatively untutored audiences. (Carroll 190)

*3. Telenovelas as mass art

The often announced "death of the author", paradoxically declared by well known authors such as Barthes and Foucault, is more a condition of mass arts than it is of fine arts, and specially typical of telenovelas. This sense of the decreasing importance of the author is perhaps a result of the increasing attention to mass arts rather than of a change of status of the author in fine arts. While the function of the author is still necessary and important for cultivated arts as a guarantee of the unity, authenticity and source of meaning of an artwork, in mass arts authorial agency has become fragmentary to the degree that is difficult to know who is actually speaking. As most contemporary design products like automobiles, refrigerators, show business stars and political campaigns, mass arts are collective works industrially produced by a variety of skilled professionals in different fields of expertise.

Television programs can be divided into productive and reproductive modes of fabrication. In the latter case, television is used as a broadcasting device to transmit events that are generated in a different setting and format (televised sports, movies, documentaries). While events of reproductive programs can exist independently of television, productive modes

depend exclusively upon televised technology and grow out of it. These productive modes are of three kinds: informative (news, debates, interviews, reports, commercial spots), entertainment (reality shows, contests, musicals, videoclips) and serials (cartoons, miniseries, sitcoms, thriller and detective series, telenovelas and soap operas). Serials differ from the former genres in their dependence upon television technology as their necessary condition of production and in their specifically aesthetic mode of reception. Their quality may vary, but these genres can be clearly defined as mass arts: born with and by television, they all have a clear cultural ancestry in caricature and satirical illustrations, fairy tales, cloak and swords stories, thrillers and novels in fascicles.

Telenovelas are typical mass artforms of industrial and postindustrial urban societies designed for the purposes of mass consumption, financial profit, social modernization and globalization.⁶ In this process, telenovelas have been particularly efficient by involving a whole range of connotations and associations that viewers willingly absorb and integrate into their everyday life. They are strictly mass art forms as defined by Noël Carroll (1997, 198 n2), because they descend from acknowledged artforms such as drama, novella in installments, particularly European melodrama and feuilleton of the 19th century in France and England. Telenovelas' sources, as an adaptation of thematic and characterological aspects, may be traced back to Racine's realistic characters and ferocious passions, particularly French larmoyante comedy and romance in installments until its more recent and direct predecessors in comic strip love stories, fotonovela and radionovela.⁷

Telenovelas are produced according to a variety of categories among which we can mark melodrama for children, for teenagers, for housewives and housemaids, exotic, thrillers, political, historical, epic, of social content, horror, humor, westerns etc.⁸ Some telenovelas are more innovative than others, some take risks, others repeat the exact same formula. Although we may usually find unintentional humor, pathetic performances, trivial

problems, disgusting scenes, clumsy fabrication, stereotype characters and cliché dialogues and situations,⁹ it is still possible to detect more psychologically complex characters, subtle humor, folk wisdom and a degree of social criticism. Quality radically varies in every aspect of telenovelas, so one may find innovative camera movements and lightning in conservative style telenovelas, outstanding performances despite a poor argument and ordinary themes explored with great insight or the contrary, a good argument destroyed by a poor performance, relevant topics superficially and banally treated.

As such, telenovelas are amazingly successful in captivating millions of spectators and transcending economic, cultural, age, gender and social barriers. What is it about this art form that appeals to such an enormous quantity and variety of people?

*4. Semantic, syntactic and pragmatic dimensions of telenovela

The relatively simple stories of telenovelas don't present a diversity of possible interpretations and can always be summarized in a few phrases. A protagonic couple falls in love, then one of them becomes the victim of a villain's deeds or makes a mistake that ramifies into various increasing problems, is condemned to suffer for months, proceeds in crescendo to the climax until, contrary to the aristotelian idea of tragedy, it wholly complies with the audience's expectations in granting a happy ending. A simple story with baroque developments and often superfluous derivations is mainly enjoyed through each of its intricate details. The same event is screened through each character's reaction (and the reaction at the reaction). A close-up penetrates into every character's anguish or satisfaction, good or bad sentiments, typical mechanism of this genre. The point is not what happens but how it happens, and in this "how" is where telenovelas' specific aesthetic properties reside.

The semantic dimension of telenovelas can be outlined in four golden rules: 1) moral order (the evil and despicable must pay for their deeds and the fortunate atone for their luck), 2) emotional exhibition (love and personal property are the main motifs of the story and excuse for the expression of a whole range of emotions such as jealousy, bitterness, anxiety, disdain, anger, hatred, temptation, fear, sadness, self-pity, impotence, remorse..., 3) attitudinal impersonation: characters are divided according to their capacity of subordination, arrogance, humility, domination, loyalty, compassion, betrayal, defiance etc., but most of all, by their capacity of having sentiments¹⁰ and 4) family restoration. All telenovelas are based on the story of a family that has conflicts, is threatened, maybe destroyed but at the end it is either restored or a new family is created with a better outlook. In other words, justice must be done, emotions exhibited, attitudes deployed and the family united to reach a happy ending.¹¹

From a syntactic dimension, a telenovela keeps a fractal relation between the whole and its parts. The genre's structure is an assemblage of chapters made of various scenes that end in a mini climax every day, a midi-climax towards the end of the week while the whole keeps progressing towards the main climax according to aristotelian structure of drama. This is the principal difference between telenovelas and its sister genre, soap operas: Although both have many features in common (daily broadcast, melodrama format, family centered relations, passions, power and money at the core of the story) they differ in many significant aspects, particularly in the aristotelian composition of the former conceived as a whole with a more traditional sense of unity, some degree of suspense, development, climax and finale. Soap operas, on the other hand, are an aggregate of episodes that can last for years, are almost never ending and their characters age and disappear in real time.¹²

Telenovelas require at least 4 kinds of characters, as Covarrubias et al and Ferrari defined them: the victim, the protector, the fool and the villain. The story evolves through typical

landmarks and turning points: a radical change of personality or metamorphosis, the revelation of a very consequential secret and the recognition of identity or agnition.¹³ Again, the three parts of the plot according to Aristotle (1452b 9), e.g. Peripety, Discovery and Suffering, are invariably present in telenovelas. Telenovelas, however, are much better at the aristotelian idea of Complication than in Denouement because a clumsy happy ending is often artificially injected into the plot at the very last chapter. What keeps suspense and action going is the tension between retention and revelation of a secret.¹⁴

Finally, the analysis of the pragmatic dimension, as the relation between this genre and its audience, can render significant results if approached from a diversity of perspectives. Since telenovelas are univocal (with a clearly defined topic), the problem shifts from the meaning of telenovelas and its potential interpretations, to the actions performed by the audience in relation to this genre. I will dedicate the rest of the paper to this particular aspect.¹⁵

5. *Aesthetic reception of telenovela

Marx's awareness that new objects produce new subjects through a process of reciprocal conditioning is also pertinent to new forms of production effecting new forms of appropriation. We cannot speak of the same kind of consumption when referring to a shampoo, a philharmonic concert, a video game or a building. Since the process of production of fine arts wholly differs from that of mass arts, it not surprising that the process of reception is also distinct in each case and must be addressed differentially and in detail. We cannot indiscriminately apply a reception theory formulated having canonical literary texts in mind, such as Eco, Iser, Jauss and Fish's, to other artistic genres, whether high or low brow. To begin with, there are many problematic concepts within reception theories, such as Stanley Fish's contextual determinism which mirrors textual determinism, Jauss' vague notion of "horizons of expectation" and Iser's equally nebulous notion of

"implicit reader". Moreover, we cannot use terms like readers, destinataires, consumers, audiences, spectators, users, interpreters etc. interchangeably as synonyms in a tentative single theory of reception.

Telenovelas are not directed to readers, even in the wide sense of the term, because they obviously do not require a trained individual with a literary background and competence. They are not directed to interpreters nor to qualified "interpretative communities" (as Fish's implicit academic world) because the plots are relatively one dimensional and univocal, not polysemic. We can't speak of consumers because telenovelas do not persuade the audience to buy anything in particular; (only commercial breaks do, which are altogether another genre). We are not dealing with spectators either since the audience's main interest in this genre is, I contend, operative, not only contemplative.

Telenovelas do not alter common ways of understanding (which may be expected of fine arts) but may modify opinions towards problematic issues such as abortion, AIDS, extramarital relations, child education etc. and solve them according to the majority of viewers' expectations and hegemonic values. In other words, they are informative rather than formative because they may influence viewers' beliefs in certain topics but not modes of apprehension.¹⁶ In fine arts, on the other hand, a formative process renders in each case a different understanding of relatively enduring themes. Mass arts, and specially telenovelas, are directed to well defined features of an anonymous public, whereas fine arts are directed to a more recondite, intimate part of the spectators' subjectivity. Fine arts attempt to bring the spectator to a wholly different point of view, making the spectator almost stand on the author's shoes. Mass arts have no such intentions. Since there is no defined authorial pivot, there is no circumscribed focal point from which meaning is generated.

If we compare telenovela to its closest genres in the fine arts, for instance literature and theater, significant differences in the processes of reception become salient. While they both share a cathartic value, appreciation of literature and theater is to a certain extent disinterested and does not render practical benefits, whereas reception of telenovela does offer practical knowledge and a variety of conscious and unconscious applications. The former has artistic value while the latter has practical value.

This mode of reception in the specific case of telenovela justifies employing the term of "users" rather than "spectators" because the audience's attraction to this genre is to a great degree practical. Kant's idea of "disinterested interest" towards artworks becomes an "interested disinterest" towards telenovelas because attention is relatively disperse and tolerates distraction, as one can follow the story while doing something else. As Sodré notes, the family semiotic model for everyday situations and characters' interaction obeys to the need of a centrifugal broadcast and formal repetition to keep the thread of the story clear despite distraction. The public not only receives information through these stories that is later applied to everyday life but performs a variety of operations with it. These operations can be characterized as: a) cathartic discharge, b) satisfaction of the scopic pulsion or appetite of seeing, c) family ritualization and time diagramming, d) acquisition of adaptative information and identity construction, e) mythogenic affirmation and f) commutation between reality and fiction.

*6. Cathartic discharge

It is worth noticing how smoothly telenovelas fit into Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accesories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form;

with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions. (Aristotle 1449b 23-28).

Equally intended as an imitation of serious actions in a dramatic form, telenovelas arouse pity and fear and accomplish catharsis. Through the cathartic operation, the user can enjoy a wide variety of tears (of happiness, sorrow, fear, self-pity, impotence, anger...) and even weep with the characters in moments of reconciliation and revelation (in the aristotelian sense). These emotional effects, however, are not limited to a discharge of pity and fear only, but include also envy, need of control, yearning for love, loneliness and a desire to harm. As Gubern notes, the audience frees frustrations and destructive anxieties by means of the evil character, simultaneously satisfying opposite psychological needs of both hate and love. The user has the opportunity of enjoying vicarious infliction of pain without guilt, since it all was the villain's idea only.

The purification of envy refers to the users' expectation that the fortunate should atone for their good luck. There is a need of control satisfied by the genre's inviolable warranty of a happy ending. These two emotions are mythogenic in principle as will be explained below. The yearning for love is related to the scopoc desire and idolomania, whereas the feeling of loneliness is relieved by the proxemic effect and vicarious dwelling. Both will be clarified in detail subsequently.

Telenovelas demand from their audience a sustained attendance, almost an addiction, despite tolerating a degree of distraction. Without dedication, empathy is lost and catharsis impossible. The main cathartic effect of telenovelas is achieved by a sense of relief when, after months of retention, the secret is finally revealed, the long desired word pronounced, the confession made, the recognition obtained, the hug procured, the love declared, the remorse exposed, the humiliation endured and the punishment imposed.

*7. Scopic pulsion

Gubern defines the scopic pulsion as " the irresistible appetite of seeing that is characteristic of human intelligence and that, as a biological force, would be contemplated with suspicion by all religious rigorisms, as exemplified by biblical punishment inflicted upon Lot's wife." ¹⁷ One can also add the case of Orpheus coming out of the infernal regions and failing to rescue Euridyce by succumbing to the scopic pulsion. This drive or desire to see involves a variety of beliefs and behaviors, from the Semitic horror of images and the Protestant schism, to public curiosity over the rich and famous' private lives and the whole area of pornography. The scopic pulsion nurtures Renaissance art by visually displaying sacred images and significant events such as the Annunciation, the Holy Birth and the Crucifixion, together with many biblical and mythological episodes. Telenovelas satisfy this pulsion in three ways: by allowing to stare beyond decorum, by exposing the concoction of evil and by hosting viewers at vicarious dwellings.

*7.1. The sanctioned gaze

In the definition of tragedy quoted above, by "pleasurable accesories" Aristotle means "that with rhythm and harmony or song superaded". Pleasure derived from these accesories is created by the form of language, whereas telenovelas have nothing to offer in elegance of speech or rhythm. There are, however, other accesories in telenovela that are pleasurable to the audience: While Aristotle's pleasurable accesories relate to what Kant defined as free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*), those of telenovelas are closer to "adherent beauty" (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). ¹⁸

Telenovelas attempt to substitute beauty as a result of refined form, rhythm in speech and depth of content essential to classical drama, with the physical beauty and personal appeal of the protagonic actors and actresses. Designed around a male and a female character who appear in each and every chapter representing a prototypical couple, their main asset is

simply an attractive appearance and a pleasant personality. Gubern notes that the actors and actresses' face is the only irreplaceable element in a process of production of telenovela.¹⁹ Traversa (66) also characterizes telenovela as a gender wholly centered on facial expression, as opposed to theater and film.²⁰ The rest, as in industrial production, is more or less assembled and interchanged. This feature, usually exploited by the film industry and its constellation of movie stars, acquires a different meaning in telenovela due to its recurring presence through the screens, a property that makes their characters seem relatively at hand.

Proxemic conventions are quite precise concerning when and how long is looking at other people permitted; staring is strictly forbidden. The camera of telenovelas overcomes this prohibition and captures the face and the body without shame or modesty. It explores every detail: the shape of the teeth, the colors of the iris, the contour of the nails, the arrangement of the eyelashes, the form of the nostrils... The audience watches every gesture: the way in which actors and actresses look when they smile, when they cry, when they feel anxiety or rage; how do they look in red or in blue, in formal or informal clothing, with different hairstyles, wet or dry, in daylight or twilight.

The operation performed by the choice of attractive characters is the well known and repeatedly exploited recourse of erotic allure. Teenagers literally fall in love with both performers and characters of telenovela. Using Jean Cazaneuve's term of *vedettariat* for the present elites of birth, merit and showbiz, Gubern defines this iconofilia or idolomania as an erotic fetishism towards the image attested by the voluminous quantity of correspondence they receive.

*7.2 The spectacle of evil.

The second pleasure conveyed by the scopic pulsion is the spectacle of evil. Part of the thrill that telenovelas generate is witnessing how nefarious can an ordinary person be. Moreover, antagonists have often a great opportunity for accomplishing a more complex and creative dramaturgical performance and provoking stronger emotional reactions from the public than the virtuous protagonists.²¹ Actors and actresses who play villains are rewarded with the possibility to represent more than one personality and of performing characters that have more psychological depth. The antagonists are often the strongest and most interesting characters; they may display the greatest intelligence and sagacity and appear utterly invincible. These pernicious individuals also are the only characters capable of planning for the future, of grasping minute details and taking advantage of opportunities, whereas the pretty righteous only react to the situations created by the bad guys. The pleasure they render is partly demiurgic: they show to what degree individuals are capable of influencing others' lives.

*7.3 . The dwelling effect

Film industry provides great satisfaction to our scopic appetite. We could actually see how the "Titanic" sank, what happened to the dishes, the chairs, the lamps, everything as a scenario for a telenovela melodrama. In the film industry, millions of dollars are spent to entice the scopic pulsion, transporting us to an opulent past with Cecil de Mille's epic representations or to a startling future with George Lucas' productions.²² We visit the worlds of film, whereas in telenovelas, we vicariously dwell in them.

This effect is achieved as a result of the genre's particular way of lingering through time. Events appear to happen in real time. As Gubern notes, there is a continuous biographical flow that resembles real life. Films, on the other hand, are presented as a finite experience with a more compact sense of unity. Telenovelas, like real life, do not provide a sense of unity except through the long term; they persist on and on. Umberto Eco (1985, 129)

suggests that this iterative, episodic structure and the fragmentation of suspense and repetitive sequences generate a singular dialectic between innovation and repetition. Each episode follows another in a similar way as each day follows another. We have a sense of being inside and near at hand, rather than outside and at a distance. This permanence and relative lack of unity are the means for creating a unique effect of proximity typical of telenovelas as a genre.

In short, as a result of integrating the scopic pulsion and the proxemic device, telenovelas are capable of conveying a sense of vicarious dwelling in exotic cultures, remote places and elapsed times. The audience can have the sensation of moving into old haciendas and far away landscapes, picturesque cultures and gone by ways of life. Nostalgia and curiosity, a yearning for a lover or a home can be momentarily palliated by the scopic and proxemic potential of telenovela. As Sodr  notes, the quotidian presence of a "traditional house" through the screen has tranquilizing effects for spectators who live in an apartment and require arquetypal images of a traditional home.

*8. The family locus, proxemics and ritualization

Most tragedies, Greek or Shakespearean, present a family at the center of the story.

"Whenever the tragic deed, however, is done within the family... these are the situations the poet should seek after."²³ Telenovelas follow Aristotle's advice by invariably having a family as the nucleus of the plot, except with a peculiar difference: telenovelas rely less on action than on reaction. Sodr  (41) states that telenovelas are characterized by enunciation marks of the familial quotidian, creating habits by cyclical repetition and organization of everyday periodicity (See also Gonz lez 1993, Covarrubias, Bautista & Uribe 1994, Aguilar Mantec n & Mantec n 1995). One could add that, since the selection of programs at prime time has to be negotiated among family members, telenovelas achieve consensus

by the clever solution of presenting a character for each member of the family to identify with.

Gubern describes how the television has become the epicenter of a household, previously occupied by the hearth, and how it has reorganized families' meeting spaces towards the screen eliminating all visual obstacles. He believes that television conveys a window effect by simulating an open window towards the social landscape with very selective criteria over what is worth or not to appear through it.²⁴ For Puppo (1997,115), telenovelas are also windows where streets' rumor enters domestic space. The window metaphor, however, falls short in describing the *modus operandi* of telenovelas. Much more than a window, telenovelas function as a virtual door in a family's kitchen, bedroom or living room. While the window of fine arts or cinema opens to the extraordinary and allows us to contemplate wonderful, astonishing worlds, the door of telenovelas opens to the ordinary, and this is their main appeal.

The door of telenovelas creates the impression of a two way circulation: we can go out of our home into the characters' house or have the characters visit our house as close members of the family. This effect is created by stratagems such as simultaneity, ritualization and exclusivity. First, by common reference and simultaneous viewing, members of a family end up speaking of the characters as real people whom they all know as intimately or more than members of their own family. They judge their actions, empathize with them, use them to tease siblings or take them as examples to legitimize or criticize a position within the family. ²⁵

Second, the secret door of telenovelas is not only a centripetal spot on the space of a household but a time diagramming device. It punctually opens on time and characters' voices fill the house for 30 or 60 minutes every day, five or six times a week. Watching the

telenovela becomes a family ritual that structures time and is linked to daily activities. Ordinary chores are organized in a similar way to expecting close relatives' visit. Dinner is served before, during or after prime time telenovela, depending where the television is located.²⁶ Third, contrary to everyday life, characters are so faithful to their audience that they let things happen exclusively when viewers are ready to watch them. They have no privacy at all but appear to be unaware of it. Even when they talk to themselves, as is so common in American soap opera, an ear is near.

While a film requires a distance from the screen, is normally presented in a public space and addresses each of the spectators individually, telenovelas are watched in the privacy of domestic space and in the company of the family, addressing them all simultaneously. Because the family is the site of everyday life, of privacy, of rituals, affections, material and symbolic practices as well as the locus of training for public performance and of identity production, telenovelas play an important part in these processes, specially among middle and low social classes, by establishing a common reference and means for communicating and legitimating attitudes, beliefs and opinions.²⁷

*9. Adaptative strategies and construction of the self.

In most megacities like Sao Paulo, Caracas, Los Angeles and Mexico City, public space has disintegrated and social interactions that formerly took place in neighborhoods and city squares are now restricted to consumers' individual transit through malls and supermarkets.²⁸ As a result of this shrinkage of social interaction, the media has increasingly absorbed part of the functions previously performed in public plazas. Contemporary urban citizens are now left to explore the world through television and computer screens.

In this context, telenovelas provide a surrogate peer group for social integration and a virtual *vecindad* in suburban population. The ambiguous relation of fiction and reality in telenovelas enables the appropriation of fashions, forms of interaction and references to reality. Telenovela audiences take information that enriches what Bourdieu calls cultural, social and economic capital. Users who aspire to social mobility find in this genre a detailed catalogue of lifestyles and an opportunity for aesthetic instruction on sanctioned criteria of "good taste" among higher social classes: house decoration, clothing and hairstyles according to age and class levels, the know how of combining accessories, how to dress for each occasion etc. In short, telenovelas provide an inventory of iconic paradigms with which users can successfully construct their own quotidian syntagms.

Vilches affirms that discourse of television series has to be analyzed as a process of social construction of reality. I would add that there is also a process of social construction of identity. Telenovelas are a guidebook for the construction of identity or what Goffman has called "the presentation of the self in everyday life". They render a catalogue of "looks" to choose from, an integrated picture of identities including attitudes, activities and lifestyles that have adaptative value to the audience. This identity construction manual is not limited to the iconic register, but comprises the lexic, kinesic and acoustic registers as well.²⁹ The public of telenovelas, particularly children and teenagers, learn manners of speaking, body language and intonation that are later applied to their everyday life. Teenagers learn how to relate to the opposite sex, what personality and attitudes are more attractive and popular, what behaviors should be avoided. These strategies play an important role in the pleasure experienced by the audience because, as Aristotle (1448b 13-15) reminds us, "to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it" and even if what each one deems worth learning considerably varies.

*10. Mythogenic power

Dorfles (1969, 25) was well aware, 30 years ago, that the occurrence of mythogenic and mythopoetic elements is very often linked to technology. He moreover believes that aesthetic can accompany the magical age as well as the religious and the technological. Telenovelas have many elements common to mythical discourse, such as dualism, legends and symbolic stereotypes, as Sodré has pointed out. I may add that the mythogenic power of telenovelas is evinced by the recurrence of several well known fairy tales and universal stories. We find Cinderellas (the poor girl that marries a rich man and discovers she's in fact of a high class origin),³⁰ Sleeping Beauties (the lonely and miserable heroine that has to be rescued by the handsome young man), Little Red Riding Hoods (the heroine that has to overcome dangerous sexual encounters that threaten her virginity), Snow whites (cute young victims of mothers in law and stepmothers), taming of shrews,³¹ happy ending Romeos and Juliets, repented Bovarys, variants of Gone with the Wind, ³² and a curious rendering of the Karamazov Brothers (in *Pura Sangre Venezuela* 1996) replete with wonderful folk sayings of rural Venezuela.

Gubern (1997) humorously ³⁵ lists a number complexes typical of telenovelas' characters that are related to Greek mythology: For males, we have King Midas or compulsion of changing everything into gold, the Brutus Complex where the initiated destroys his initiator, Satyriasis or womanizing and narcissism. Women's' complexes are: Cinderella's Complex or social climbing by wedding without responsibilities, the Diana Complex or virile protest of insubordinate women, the Complex of Batsheba or adultery by calculation, Circe Complex as compulsive seductress, Mesaline Complex or nymphomania, Dalila Complex of castrating women and Daphne Complex or permanent virgins.

Because telenovelas are produced in countries where Catholicism is the main religion, several figures from Catholic doctrine are common in the plots. We usually find topics of

forgiveness, betrayal, mysterious origin, ingratitude towards the mother, goodness of the poor and wickedness of the rich, metamorphosis, expiation, sacrifice, temptation, and penance. This thematic recurrence may partly explain why telenovelas are particularly successful in other Catholic countries like Hungary, Poland, Italy and Spain.

In every single case, the handsome young man has to sweat, struggle and survive the unbearable to win his lady, and he always, always does. There is an unwritten law typical of this genre that commands that the good-looking must pay with tears and agony to deserve their beauty and happiness. How much and how bad these characters must suffer to be worthy of their final happiness is the core of the story. Deceit is finally defeated by good and candid personalities, the logos of evil surrenders to the ethos of virtue and love conquers it all. The beautiful have duly paid for their beauty and now it is the wicked's turn to ail. An emotional insurance policy is invariably issued in which viewers agree to bond sentimentally with the characters and invest as many tears as necessary if this basic contract is respected: no matter how terrible the situation looks like, it will always arrive to the best of all possible worlds. This pact of telenovelas is signed, as Aristotle writes (1453a) , "through the weakness of the audiences; the poets merely follow their public, writing as its wishes dictate. But the pleasure here is not that of Tragedy. It belongs rather to Comedy, where the bitterest enemies in the piece (e.g. Orestes and Aegisthus) walk off good friends at the end, with no slaying of any one by any one."

For social psychologists and New Age believers, it would be interesting to note the recurrence of two themes, metamorphosis and revelation or *agnition*, as probable symptoms of a generalized longing. The protagonic characters of telenovela, particularly females, almost always undergo a mutation from candid to refined that not only symbolizes virginity but expresses a belief in , and a craving for total individual transformation. *Agnition* clearly gives form to a need for recognition symptomatic of a prevalent feeling of being

undervalued and indicates a desire of possessing a temporarily hidden, better self that will eventually unveil. These two topics converge into a single myth of the ugly duckling or the butterfly fantasy.

The main myths enacted by telenovelas are: a) the myth of irresponsibility and the reversibility of actions: deeds are not really tragic and have no real consequences because they are generally reversible, as long as the protagonists perform them, b) control over fate: warranty of happy ending, c) pain is temporary, but happiness lasts forever: characters are accompanied by the audience only through their tribulations, but are left on their own when problems are solved, d) aesthetics equals ethics: the prettiest are always the worthiest, e) cosmic justice: the fortunate must atone for their good luck and good looks f) sphincter continence makes the sphinx confess: the secret must be withheld and finally revealed, g) the butterfly fantasy: the hidden self and total metamorphosis will overcome.

*11. A commutation between fiction and reality

Fine arts build new realities with pieces of fiction, whereas in telenovela, fiction is built with pieces of reality.³³ Part of the attraction that telenovelas exert upon their audience is grounded on their ambiguous relation between reality and fiction. Telenovelas are not only a reflection of reality but an intertwining with it.³⁴ Contrary to literature and film, telenovela performers have to work daily for months on each of its numerous episodes. This quotidian work urges them to react almost naturally to fictitious situations, and, if they are talented, intuitively follow Stanislavski's naturalistic method in acting. There is hardly any margin for invention and fabrication of the characters, so acting draws a great deal of its credibility from the actor or actress's real personality or else simply repeats the same clichés. In this sense, telenovelas' success strongly depends upon performers' personal appeal. The main characters have to be not only pretty but pleasant. A good story with bad acting may fail, while a poor plot with agreeable performers or great acting may succeed.

Brazilian telenovelas were the first to develop an open format in which recent events were directly incorporated as episodes of the story. "Renascer" (Revival), "Fera Ferida" (Wounded Beast) and "Patria Minha" (My Homeland) analyzed by Mauro Porto in relation to Brazilian political context, insert scenes and topics that refer to concurrent social and political events. In the first production of Argos company, Nada Personal, a corrupt politician of extraordinary resemblance in image and speech style to ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, appeared as a dark silhouette devising nefarious actions.

Exactly a day after Mexico's special anti-drug District Attorney was almost killed in an ambush, another telenovela, El Candidato, casually opened with a similar scene. El Candidato refers to the present political confrontation between the pre candidates for presidential elections of the year 2000. As Brazil's ex-president Collor de Mello used telenovelas Vale Tudo 1989, O Dono do Mundo 1991 and O Reno de Avilan 1989 first as campaign propaganda and then for his regime legitimation (Klagsbrunn 1997, 164), El Candidato is tacit propaganda for Francisco Labastida, pre-candidate for presidency of the PRI (and interestingly enough, after two weeks of transmission, there are no objections from the opposition so far).³⁵ Telenovelas are becoming an immensely powerful and dangerous instrument for political propaganda due to their monological discourse (in Bakhtin's sense) even if a degree of polyphony is introduced through secondary or tertiary characters (in this case, a student portrays opinions closer to opposition party PRD). No political party would be able to afford the amount of transmission time of telenovelas, and no political columns in any newspaper or magazine can compete with the degree of penetration of this genre. They urgently require not only ideological analysis as proposed by Thompson but critical intertextuality and pluralism where characters like El Candidato would be questioned from other telenovelas.

Since Aristotle has been on the back of my mind while writing this paper, I would like to add a final word in regards to the contrast between two kinds of television serials: comedy and melodrama. Contemporary versions of these two genres in television actually invert Aristotle's idea that "... for Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life." In fact, telenovelas usually present characters that are worse than most people: they lack dignity, are petty or stupid, can think of nothing else than romance, power and money. Moreover, protagonists often present disturbed behaviors (insincerity, self pity, manipulation, hysteria, bitterness) as socially desirable , even virtuous. Sitcoms, on the other hand, create characters that surpass average people in their wit, quick mind, candor and sense of humor. Most of us, unfortunately, are unable to laugh at ourselves and find the jocose twist in everyday events. Contrary to telenovelas that evade problems derived from ethnic and sexual differences, sitcoms openly relate to these issues, deal with prejudices regarding social minorities and help release tensions among different social classes.

*12. Conclusion

If aesthetics is understood as the theory of art, it must encompass all kinds of art, both fine and mass arts. Telenovelas are far from the sublime and close to the ordinary, but they nonetheless have a potential for portraying situations that have moral, social and psychological relevance to their audience. A particular syntax, paradigmatic stories, recurrent topics and hyperbolically expressed sentiments characterize this genre. Reception of telenovela greatly depends upon its insertion into everyday life. The six operations of aesthetic reception demarcated above function as an integrated whole reciprocally affecting and conditioning each other. There are direct connections between the scopic pulsion and family locus; catharsis is related to the mythogenic power and scopic pulsion; adaptative strategies and construction of the self depend on the reality/fiction commutation and family locus. The utilizations that the audience performs through telenovelas do not invalidate their aesthetic character but rather expand the scope of responses associated to the aesthetic.

Although watching telenovelas cannot be considered an aesthetic experience in Dewey's sense because it is difficult to grasp them as a unity, they nonetheless imply a doing (a process of construction of the self and of social integration) and an undergoing (empathy, cathartic effects and emotional bonding with the characters) that together constitute an aggregate of aesthetic impressions.

As Steimberg points out, telenovelas are not a rigid genre but manifest an evolution where various degrees of innovation, quality and social significance can be detected. In some cases it has overcome melodrama and progresses towards a sweet and sour version of reality instead of the typical sentimental clichés. Topics like AIDS, government corruption, drugs, infidelity, age differences and family abuse are beginning to be taken into account. Perhaps this genre could gradually cease underestimating the audience's intelligence and become formally more creative and experimental; it may further help cope with problems like old age, handicap, birth defects, physical and mental abuse, bringing to the fore social questions related to unemployment, religious and ethnic prejudices, social injustice and civic conscience.³⁶

While politics keep approaching melodrama (Clintongate, the Wales and Monaco royal families, the Menem and Fujimori marriage scandals all of which would make wonderful telenovelas) melodrama is approaching politics in its topics and democratically elected finale. As the line between reality and fiction keeps blurring, telenovelas' great repercussion as an art form makes aesthetic analyses expedient.³⁷

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¹See José Marques de Melo, Sergio Mattos and Monica Rector.

²Mazziotti in Argentina, the group of the University of Colima around González Sánchez, Covarrubias et al, Aguilar et al, Pardo and Barbero in Mexico, Ferrari in Cuba, Quiroz and Márquez in Peru.

³Particularly on *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and *Dallas*. See Brake, Buckingham, Dyer, Nown, Smith and Holland, Allen, Geraghty, Ang, Herzog-Massin and Porter among others.

⁴ So called ephemeral arts, such as conceptual art, performance and land art are nonetheless documented in video and photography and presented in museums and galleries for guaranteeing a degree of permanence.

⁵With the exception of public consumption of live pop music concerts and private consumption of literature or private art collections.

⁶Ben Amor has shown how, in the so called "third world countries", television is being used as a tool for modernization and homogenization of the society, as well as for legitimation of a new social order.

⁷Followed by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos and later Madame de Stael, Benjamin Constant, George Sand, Victor Hugo, Stendhal, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen and The Bronte sisters. According to Ferrari it is based upon musical melodrama of the XVI century and lacrimous comedy of XVIII century.

⁸On telenovela genres, see Simões 1997.

⁹The typical scene: she/he enters the room exactly when the hated rival is kissing him/her or he/she talks alone revealing his/her true feelings and intentions.

¹⁰In a study of telenovela reception performed in Chile, Vilches (1997, 56) notes that the audience immediately compares the telenovela to everyday life and judges characters according to conventional moral standards.

¹¹This rule is so decisive that, for example, when the protagonist actress of *Nada Personal*, Ana Colchero renounced when only 85 % of the chapters were recorded, the best aesthetic and dramatic solution to her character would have been murder (since previous unsuccessful attempts have been part of the argument). Instead, the producers decided to substitute her for another actress that looked somehow alike, decreasing overall quality just to achieve the sine qua non happy ending, even if it was not a wedding in this case.

¹²For example: *The Young and the Restless*, *General Hospital*, *The Days of our Lives*, *Guiding Light*, *All my Children*, *One Life to Live*, *Another World*, *Bold and Beautiful* and *As the World Turns*, *Coronation Street*...

¹³Term used by Eco 1985 for recognition.

¹⁴ See Escudero 1997.

¹⁵ The main corpus of this paper is Mexican telenovela, and the empirical sources for the analysis of reception are based on González and Covarrubias, Bautista and Uribe thorough ethnographical studies on the role of television and reception of telenovelas.

¹⁶When a telenovela loses verisimilitude or becomes a bit more complex or challenging, it is immediately rejected by the audience (Covarrubias, Bautista & Uribe 1994, 220).

¹⁷(Gubern 1996, 10). Translation from Spanish original text is mine.

¹⁸ I am referring to Kant's distinction in the *Critique of Judgment*: "

But the beauty of man (including under this head that of a man, woman, or child), the beauty of a horse, or of a building (such as a church, palace, arsenal, or summer-house),

presupposes a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection; and is therefore merely appendant beauty.(Kant SS 16).

¹⁹The substitution of Ana Colchero for another actress mentioned in note 11 supra was a heavy blow against this telenovela's high ratings. On this issue, see Preston 1996.

²⁰In many cases, telenovelas are created having no more than a specific actress in mind, as in the case of the Argentinean Andrea del Boca or the Mexican Thalia.

²¹Performers who have played antagonists often complain of being approached by people in the street who blame them for their evil actions, taking the actor for the character half seriously and half playfully.

²²What is unlikely to occur are Sci-Fi telenovelas because each and every element that appeals to its public would be lost: the sense of proximity, clues to practical life, immediacy, domestic frame.

²³ Aristotle (1453a 19)

²⁴ The window metaphor is very common in describing painting and cinema, as Bazin and Mitry, for example, do. The door, on the other hand, is better for describing video games and virtual space.

²⁵As documented by Covarrubias, Bautista and Uribe's empirical study.

²⁶ See Klagsbrunn 1997, 167.

²⁷See Aguilar et al and Covarrubias et al.

²⁸On the relation between public and private space in megacities such as Mexico D.:F see García Canclini and Piccini (1993) who studied 1500 families in Mexico City.

²⁹ For a detailed explanation of how these registers operate in everyday life, see Mandoki 1994.

³⁰"Our canon is a combination of Cinderella and Romeo and Juliet with a happy ending," said Eugenio Cobo, Televisa's director of artistic development. "We don't deal in raw reality because we want people to have their dreams." (quoted by Preston 1996).

³¹ In *Bodas de Odio* (Mexico 1985) and *Encadenados* (Mexico 1987) where the female protagonist is also named Catalina.

³²In *Valeria y Maximiliano* (Mexico 1991), *Renacer* (Brazil 1993), *Azul Tequila* (Mexico 1999), *Cafe con Aroma de mujer* (Colombia).

³³ I have dealt elsewhere with the problem of how are new realities constituted through fine arts. See my "Aesthetics and pragmatics: conversion, constitution and the dimensions of illocutionary acts" *Pragmatics & Cognition* (in press).

³⁴A good illustration of this flexibility between reality and fiction was Vice-president Dan Quayle' attack on sitcom character Murphy Brown for becoming a single mother and destroying family values. Fiction was turned into reality. In the next episode, Murphy Brown reads Quayle's commentary on the newspapers and wittingly answers it. A transition from reality into fiction and back. This transit increases the sense of a blurred border between the two.

³⁵ In one of the episodes, a student complains of the ongoing boycott of the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico has been seized by a group of students for four months already)) directly linking fiction to reality. An episode was inserted on September 2nd, 1999, a day after President Ernesto Zedillo's Presidential anual information speech to the Congress, which was critically answered by the official representative, PAN representative Carlos Medina Plascencia and supported by PRD party. El Candidato criticized Medina's intervention, clearly aligning the fictional character to PRI position.

³⁶An interesting progress in this direction is being taken by the Mexican telenovela production company Argos of Hernán Vera, Carlos Payán and Epigmenio Ibarra since his first production *Nada Personal*, followed by *Demasiado Corazón*, *El amor de mi vida* and the ratings hit *Mirada de mujer*.

³⁷ As mentioned in note 34 supra with the Quayle- Murphy Brown exchange Politics are also approaching sitcom, as in the fax mistake of September 3, 1999 when Clinton's

itinerary and secret information was sent to a chicken store in New Zealand. In Mexico, most pre-candidates for presidency have appeared during this last week in comedy programs.