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'Going with the Flow: Ethnography & Dialogism in the Reception of Brazilian Telenovelas'

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Abstract

Brazilian soap-operas or telenovelas are a national passion: broadcast at prime-time, six days a week, watching telenovelas is part of the daily practices of millions of Brazilians. Most research on the reception of Brazilian telenovelas has taken into account viewer's reactions to and interpretations of the plots of telenovelas. One has a well-delineated program and a well-delineated research context, namely the immediate reception (read interpretation) of telenovela plots. Here I argue that a complete analysis of viewers' reception of telenovelas should take into account the way telenovelas are integrated and implicated within other media and within events of daily life. Telenovelas should be approached as dynamic cultural products whose retrievability goes far beyond the medium of television. Ethnographic fieldwork makes such an approach possible. Moreover, ethnography foregrounds telenovela reception as a dialogical process of appropriation, circulation and reiteration of meaning; one that is anchored and framed by socio-cultural contexts and subjective positions.

Keywords: telenovelas; everyday life; ethnography; flow; dialogism

> ”*Novelas* are a portrait of Brazil. What you see in the screen is the revelation of a hidden desire, [the revelation] of something that every Brazilian would like to have come true.” (Jeferson, 21, undergraduate student. Excerpt from a class essay on telenovelas.)

> “I watch *telenovelas* to see different things. Because here, in Brazil, there is nothing different to see. If you don’t watch television, you won’t see anything.” (Meire, 18, live-in babysitter. Excerpt from a conversation.)

> ”*Novelas* tempt the eyes of the viewers, showing everything that they would like to be, see or have.” (Júlia, 20, undergraduate student. Excerpt from a class essay on telenovelas)

Brazilian “soap-operas” or *telenovelas* are broadcast throughout Brazil, six days a week, during prime time. Every day, they attract audiences of more than 40 millions viewers. They also attract millions of dollars of advertising revenue and promote a range of commodities and desires that are made available for the television viewer. Telenovelas were the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation in social anthropology. The present article is based on some aspects of that research.

Here I argue that a complete analysis of viewers’ reception of Brazilian telenovelas should take into account the way telenovelas are integrated and implicated within other media and within events of daily life. Such an analysis should, moreover, approach telenovelas not as uninterrupted and delimited stories about the life destinies of a collection of characters, but rather as dynamic cultural products whose retrievability goes far beyond the medium of television. Finally, an analysis of viewers’ receptive experiences should also describe how messages are circulated, appropriated and reiterated in everyday situations and encounters. Underlying this discussion is a dialogical approach to the reception of media products.

The argument proceeds in three broad stages. The first is a discussion about how I came to realize through ethnographic fieldwork that when viewers/informants mentioned telenovelas in their everyday errands and conversations, they were not only referring to the plots of these programs, but also to images, advertisements, magazines, and diverse commodities that interspersed with the plots of telenovelas. Ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to visualize a crucial – though messy and complex – part of my informants’

receptive experience. In the second stage of my argumentation I discuss how I, in order to grasp and describe this complex receptive experience, engaged with the concepts of "flow" and "dialogism." The third stage consists in the analysis of two ethnographic case studies that concretely illustrate my earlier points.

The discussions presented in this article emerge from and contribute to a much debated theme within both media studies and anthropology about the impact that particular representations (telenovelas, *rites de passage*, films, public celebrations, advertisements) might have on people: do they shape what people think and how they act? The work of cinema studies scholar Robert Stam (1989) and cultural studies scholar Valerie Walkerdine (1997) regarding people's reception of popular culture has colored my own understanding of reception processes. These two authors argue from different perspectives (Walkerdine has examined the role of popular culture in the making of feminine subjectivity among young, working class girls in England, and Stam has explored Brazilian films) that there has been a polarization on the debate regarding the relationship between readers/viewers and popular culture: people are either described as (a) revolutionary and resistant in their readings of popular culture, or (b) as duped, unable or unwilling to make critical readings and concrete demands on the real world. In my own fieldwork in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, I came to share those scholars' dissatisfaction with these polarities. The people who became my informants, and their ways of relating to telenovelas, cannot easily be characterized as resistant; neither can they be characterized as duped or uncritical. As I will illustrate in this paper, my informants' receptive experiences are part of their everyday practices that, together with a range of other activities, come to shape and constitute their positions as subjects within Brazilian society.

In what follows, I briefly discuss the place of telenovelas within Brazilian television and society. I then move on to present some previous research on reception studies, focusing particularly on studies about the reception of Latin-American telenovelas published during the course of my research (1997-2002). It should be noted that even though the literature revised here is interdisciplinary, it is nevertheless particularly oriented towards anthropological understandings of media.

I have to watch! Brazilian Television and Telenovelas

Brazil is a country with one of the largest television audiences in the world. Eighty-seven percent of the households in the country have at least one television – in sheer numbers, this means 39 million TV households. Even outside the household, televisions are everywhere – in cities it is impossible to pass a street without seeing a shop, a bar, a restaurant or an office with a television. Through communication satellites, reception dishes and retransmitting ground stations, television reaches people even in the most remote villages in the country. [1]

To understand the development of television in Brazil, one has to look at the political context of the country. Television technology was introduced in Brazil in 1950 by the head of a chain of newspapers and radio stations, Assis Chateaubriand.[2] This was a time when industrialization, modernization and regional development were keywords in the Kubitschek government (1955-1961). Brásilia, the current capital of Brazil, was under construction (1957-1961). Its indirect aim was to propel the country forward, towards modernity. From its infancy, television was seen as a way to mediate oral and visual information to all possible kinds of viewers, including among them a considerable number of illiterate persons. Its spread throughout the country was seen as an issue of governmental importance.

The military coup which overthrew President João Goulart on March 31, 1964 resulted in increased state intervention in the implementation and programming of television. Television was seen by the military government (as it was by the Kubitschek government) as a way to create a national identity, and as a way to link the remote regions near Brazil's borders to the rest of the country (Straubhaar 1982, 1984; Tufte 1993). The military government encouraged the expansion of private, commercial television networks, and favored those networks whose programming would help in the preservation (and construction) of a national memory (Kehl 1979). Moreover, it was thought that television was a perfect medium to create a domestic consumer market and to attract local and foreign capital. Able to reach the whole nation, television was a way to address Brazilians as potential consumers (Lopez 1995).

Television was thus given an agglutinating function: first it integrated the nation culturally by spreading understandings of southeastern, middle-, and upper-class standards of life (such as eating habits, leisure activities, dressing and consumption styles) to the rest of the country. The southeastern region (i.e., the economic center of the country) formed by the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, became a positive model of progress, development and urbanization.[3] Television not only contributed to spread middle- and upper-class values from the center to the periphery of Brazil, but its positive portrayal of the southeastern region and its cities might also have contributed to an increased rural migration and maybe even affected other demographic changes, such as birth rates (Faria and Potter 1990).

In 1997, during my most extensive period of fieldwork, the Brazilian television industry consisted of five main independent commercial networks – *Rede Globo*; *SBT* (*Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão*); *Manchete* (bankrupted in 1998); *Bandeirantes*, and *TV Record*; and one non-commercial (and non-governmental) television network – *TV Cultura*. There are, nowadays, other commercial channels (*MTV, Canal 21, CNT, Gazeta, Rede Brasil, Rede Mulher, Rede TV!, Rede Vida, TV Senad*o) whose broadcasting is connected to certain parts of the country.

Introduced in the country in the early 1990s, cable television and its approximately seventy channels are a new option for upper- and middle-class viewers. Statistics from IBOPE – Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (2001) estimate that only thirteen percent of the households with television sets in Brazil have access to cable TV. Significantly, IBOPE also reports that viewers who have access to cable TV spend more time watching Brazilian non-cable channels than they do watching the cable channels.

What is broadcast on all these television channels? Soccer, of course, is shown more or less continually, broadcast at least twice a week. News and entertainment programs make also an important share of television's programming. But one of the most broadcast – and most watched – type of programs is the television *novelas* (which I, in accordance with academic writing on this topic, will refer to with the term *telenovelas*).

Telenovelas

Telenovelas are broadcast throughout Brazil six days a week, during prime-time. They attract a daily audience of more than 40 million viewers. Individual telenovelas are able to catch and maintain the attention of a faithful audience during their duration of six to eight months. Unlike U.S. or British soap-operas that may last for many years, a Brazilian telenovela ends after 150 to 200 episodes, and is immediately substituted by a new one. Their plots can conform to real life seasons and holidays, and often, they introduce fashions and products, approach polemical subjects and comment upon (in a realistic or parodic way) contemporary social issues. In terms of specific content, telenovelas deal with a great variety of subjects. They address issues of social positioning and power, social ascension, gender relationships, love and sexuality.

The first telenovelas were broadcast in 1951, twice a week. They were adaptations of melodramas and radionovelas to television. From 1954, most telenovelas were adaptations of non-Brazilian novels. Authors such as Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas, and Victor Hugo had some of their works adapted to telenovela plots. In 1963, starting a new trend in Brazilian television, the network *Excelsior* aired the first *daily* telenovela "*2-5499 – Ocupado*" ("2-5499 – The Line is Busy"). The content of most of these first daily telenovelas was however often still based on non-Brazilian, non-contemporary, exotic themes and melodramatic stories.

By 1968, the network *Tupi* broadcast the first telenovela based on Brazilian contemporary reality. It was the story of *Beto Rockfeller*, a Brazilian *malandro* (scoundrel), and anti-hero. Beto was a shoe-salesman who managed to pass as a millionaire and started dating a rich socialite. The telenovela portrayed how Beto oscillated between his two lives – as a humble shoe-salesman and as a prestigious (fake) millionaire. Besides its innovation in theme – the sympathetic anti-hero – this telenovela introduced colloquial language and slang to the television screen. It attained great popularity. Soon, other television networks developed their own styles of making telenovelas and started exploiting themes picked up from the contemporary social scene (such as class conflicts, inflation, middle-class life style, politics) as basic and recurring elements in the plots.

Since the end of 1960s, it is not unusual to see telenovelas referring to contemporary social issues: in December 1992, for example, Brazil's then-president, Fernando Collor, was impeached by Congress for corruption. In 1993, the telenovela *Fera Ferida* ("Wounded Beast," broadcast by *Globo*) portrayed the impeachment of the fictive mayor of the city of *Asa Branca* ("White Wings" – a clear allusion to the government and the capital city of Brasília, whose original master plan was the shape of an airplane). In 2001, one of the characters in *Laços de Família* ("Family Links," 2000-1, *Globo*) found out that she was suffering from leukemia and that she would have to go through a bone-marrow transplant in order to survive. The telenovela launched a national campaign to promote and encourage the donation of organs (*Veja*, January 10, 2001). According to the statistics held by the Brazilian Association of Voluntary Donors of Bone-Marrow, the number of donations in November 2000 was of approximately twenty persons a month. When the telenovela discussed leukemia and organ donation, this number raised to nine-hundred donors a month; an increase of 4,500 percent (Alencar 2002).

Connecting fiction and reality, many telenovelas follow the real calendar: telenovela characters celebrate Carnival, Christmas and New Year on the same days as their audience. Telenovela characters wear the same fashion that can be seen in shops and magazines and they speak about problems that are lived by the audience.

These references to contemporary social issues are embedded in a narrative structure that euphorically emphasizes articulations: unexpected, improbable, implausible interrelations make characters go through personal transformations that often result in some kind of social mobility. Seduction and love are often the driving force behind transformations and change. Different spheres of activity are brought together by telenovela characters who seduce and love one another. A message that seems to run through all telenovela plots is that seduction and love slip through the social hierarchies of class, age, race and sexuality.

In telenovelas, the subjects that most consistently represent and embody transformation and movement across social hierarchies are women. These transformations are depicted as individual renegotiations of the self: characters change from poor to rich, from unattractive women to seductresses, from prostitutes to respectable housewives, from elitist whites to politically aware mothers of black children. These transformations in

attractiveness, knowledge or status are usually lived by women and connected to social mobility.

Telenovela actors and actresses play an important role in the media world and in Brazilian society. Lopez (1995:258) suggests that for actors and actresses to “work in a telenovela today is often to have reached the apex of one’s professional career.” I would add that to work in a telenovela is also a way for an actor or actress to gain visibility in various media circuits.

The writers of these programs are famous and often better known than Brazilian authors who write fiction (Lopez 1995:261). Until the beginnings of the 1980s, a single writer was the only person responsible for the development of a telenovela plot. Nowadays, it is common to divide authorship into a series of separated tasks. So a telenovela has a main writer who sketches the initial plot and sometimes helps to cast some of the main characters. This writer is assisted by researchers who report on particular professions, situations or historical times that are going to be portrayed in the telenovela. The main writer will also be helped by one or two co-writers, who are either responsible for writing dialogues, or for writing certain sequences of the telenovela (Ortiz and Ramos 1991; *Veja*, 28 February 96). Even though the division of tasks within the telenovela industry has become quite elaborate, it is still the main writer who takes the responsibility for the success or failure of a telenovela.

Telenovelas attract millions of dollars of advertising revenues, promote a range of commodities and generate a variety of spin-off products: there are television and radio shows about telenovelas and their stars, there are gossip magazines (such as *Amiga*, *AnaMaria*, *Caras, Contigo!* and *Tititi*),[4] there are fashion magazines reporting the latest telenovela fashions (such as *Moda Moldes* and *Manequim*) and, last but not least, there are the cassettes and CDs with national and international tunes that are played during a telenovela.

Previous Research

Media has been studied from within different disciplines and with the help of different theories. A common denominator among many studies is the concern to investigate whether or not media exercises a powerful and persuasive influence upon people (Gurevitch et al. 1982). A question that almost obligatorily follows this first one, and which has also been at the core of the study of media, relates to the status of the people who receive media messages – do people *passively* receive media messages, or should they be seen as *active agents* who work to decode and interpret?

With a point of departure in Marxism, members of the Frankfurt School (Adorno 1974; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Marcuse 1968) highlighted alienation, homogenization and socio-cultural erosion as the result of commercial mass media. The standpoint of these scholars was that media had a power to impose its repressive messages directly upon unprepared *spectators*. This kind of reasoning became known as the "top-down" or "hypodermic" model, since, as Hirsch (1998) has summarized, it attributed to media the power to "inject its repressive message almost directly" (1988:213) into people who where exposed to it. A problem with this perspective is that its focus lays exclusively on media messages. No other factors, such as an analysis of the viewers' own interpretations of the messages received, were included in the research. An analysis of media messages was considered enough to understand their effects and foresee their consequences.

Revising and refining this Marxist legacy (Hall 1980 [1973]; Williams 1977),[5] and inspired by linguistic understandings of how messages are transmitted and how meaning is created through communication (Morley 1981; Hall 1982), British Cultural Studies started approaching people as active subjects in the process of interpretation of different media. This shift in perspective was marked, for instance, by a change in terminology from "spectators" to "viewers." A "viewer" as Fiske (1987:17) put it, is "someone watching television, making meaning and pleasures from it […] A viewer is engaged with the screen more variously, actively, and selectively than is a spectator." Viewers are seen as agents in the process of message decoding.

The result of this re-orientation was a change in focus, clearly noticeable during the 1980s, from the text/message, to the interpretive practices of media audiences. Diversity in audiences was examined, as was the way in which various audiences engaged with

and used different media (Lull 1986). The plurality of meanings that could be created from a media text/message was also highlighted. Moreover, as media anthropologist Debra Spitulnik (1993:296) has pointed out, these new tendencies marked a change in focus on media research – there was a move away from the idea of texts as closed, privileged sites of meaning, to an idea of texts as "dynamic sites of struggle over representation, and complex spaces in which subjectivities are constructed and identities are contested."

In the 1980s, media researchers increasingly turned towards anthropology and anthropological methods to better situate their research within complex social contexts (Ang 1985; Morley 1980; Radway 1988). Until then, much of the research on audience activity was conducted in isolation, often through the application of formal questionnaires, as if the viewers' reception was independent of any social context. A need for an ethnography on the "ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it" (Radway, 1988:366) was manifested.

Studies on the reception of television programs started investigating the context within which reception took place. Researchers looked at the varying modes of watching television and to the place television occupied (both physically and culturally) in people's lives (Barrios 1988; Lull 1988). There was an effort not only to understand people's interactions with the content of media messages, but also to situate these practices within local constraints and experiences. This effort is mirrored by research that investigates viewers' watching practices (the way people actually watch programs, who chooses what to watch, and the preparations around watching) and the place television sets occupy in the household (Dahlgren 1990; Morley 1986; Tufte 1993, 2000).

At the same time that ethnography and anthropological methods for data collection were being praised and adopted by media researchers, they were being roundly criticized and questioned within anthropology (e.g., by Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986). The ethnographic turn within media studies lacked many times the reflexivity that works like that by Clifford and Marcus had introduced into anthropological practice: people's self-reports were quite often taken at face value, and the role of the ethnographer in the process of investigation was not examined.

Anthropologists, meanwhile, had approached the study of media in several ways: "as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, and as historical developments" (Spitulnik 1993:293).

Influenced by debates revising the anthropological practice, the 1980s and 1990s mark a move (within media anthropology) towards a deeper social and cultural contextualization of both viewers and media (Abu-Lughod 1989; Das 1995; Hirsch and Silverstone 1992, 1998; Kulick and Willson 1994). A variety of studies focused on ethnographies of media (Caughey 1986; Hannerz 1990; Kottak 1990), the cultural construction of news and the study of media production (Dornfeld 1998; Graffman 2002; Pedelty 1995), and media consumption and reception (Abu-Lughod 1993, 1995; Dickey 1993; Fuglesang 1994; Lutz and Collins 1993; Mankekar 1999; Miller 1995;).[6]

Telenovela Studies

Most studies on the reception of Latin-American telenovelas (Beltrão 1993; Bustos-Romero 1993; Kottak 1990; Munoz 1992; Pace 1993; Quiroz and Márquez 1997; Vink 1988) have taken into account viewers' reactions to and interpretations of the *plots* of telenovelas. One has a well-delineated program and a well-delineated research context, namely, the *immediate* reception (read interpretation) of telenovelas' plots.[7]

Beltrão (1993), Fachel-Leal and Oliven (1987), Tufte (1993, 2000) and Vink (1988) are just a few examples of works in this area. These authors start from the idea (with which I agree) that telenovelas' plots use a great deal of repetition in their narrative structure: important events and problems are repeated and re-cited from episode to episode, in order to keep viewers in touch with the intrigues, and to allow new viewers to quickly get a picture of the whole story. In addition, in the effort to engage as many viewers as possible, the themes developed depict a variety of positions and allow for many different interpretations.

Most of the studies on the reception of telenovelas focus on women's (often from low-income backgrounds) reactions to and interpretations of telenovelas. Gender, class, and to a certain extent, age, are issues at the core of reception studies on telenovelas. The

subject of telenovelas and race has, with a few exceptions (DaSilva 1999)[8], seldom been addressed. In spite of the differences concerning themes for investigation and methods of research, studies on the reception of telenovelas seem to point in similar directions when it comes to the relationship between telenovela viewing, age and class.

There seems to be a relationship between age and the way people report about their viewing practices. The younger the viewer, the easiest it is for her/him to admit her/his likes and dislikes about a certain character or event in a telenovela. But as they reach adulthood, the connection that viewers make between personal feelings and feelings depicted by telenovela characters become less overtly articulated. The trend shifts again when it comes to older people whose opinions about telenovelas are expressed more overtly. [9]

The relationship between class and telenovela viewing has also been thoroughly studied. Fachel-Leal and Oliven (1987) compare how upper-middle class and low-income[10] women in the city of Porto Alegre (southern Brazil) retell the events of the telenovela *Sol de Verão* ("Summer Sun," 1983, *Globo*). She concludes that viewers from these two groups have very different modes of interpreting the same plot: they had different opinions about what the main subject of the telenovela was, they could disregard the prominence of certain discussions (low-income women never mentioned that the telenovela touched upon the subjects of women's sexual or professional dissatisfaction, while the upper-middle class group emphasized this very aspect in its discussions), they had different expectations regarding the way the telenovela should end (low-income women were more engaged with the destinies of the telenovela's characters and wished for a happy ending, whereas upper-middle class women had a more distanced relationship to the individual destinies of the telenovela's characters). In a nutshell, Fachel-Leal and Oliven come to the conclusion that class does play a role in the process of reception of telenovelas.

Vink (1988:219, 232) analyses how low-income women living in a neighborhood in Porto Alegre interpret telenovelas' messages in accordance with their social background. Vink argues that these viewers use their "cultural resources," their experiences being poor workers *and* women in order to produce meanings from the telenovela text. Following

Fachel's findings, he points out that there is a difference between low-income and middle-class women when it comes to the way they relate to telenovelas. While the latter have a more aesthetic involvement with the telenovela – taking a distanced position in relation to the plot, considering the performances of individual characters/actors, and evaluating the development of the plot, low-income women watch telenovelas "with their hearts" (1988:232). They have an emotional involvement with the plot.

Vink (1988:220) asserts that "emotional involvement is not an obstacle to insight or awareness"– identification with a fictive character might help the viewer to situate herself socially. He also points out that identification is not synonymous with imitative behavior, and concludes that telenovela messages can help the low-income women and men to become conscious that life can be different. In this sense, telenovela watching can be seen as a first step towards a process of social change (1988:240).

Beltrão (1993) examines the process of identification that takes place between viewers and the characters of the telenovela *Que Rei sou Eu?* ("What Kind of King Am I?," 1989, *Globo*). She interviews both men and women belonging to different socio-economical classes, all of them living in a small community in northeastern Brazil.

Beltrão argues that for the viewers she studied, identification occurred at two levels – an individual and a social level. On the one hand, viewers could relate to the plot as citizens, as members of the same community. They thus situated themselves as a collective within a Brazilian context and drew parallels between community life and the everyday life depicted by the telenovela. Individual identification was, on the other hand, characterized by the transcendence of categories of gender, race, class and age: "I found women identifying with male characters, and poor with high [i.e. upper] class characters" (1993:68). Moreover, Beltrão also points that a single viewer could identify with different aspects of several characters.

According to Beltrão, identification happened when viewers found similarities between themselves and telenovela characters (their appearance, behavior, and problems), or when viewers wished to be like the characters in telenovelas (this would explain why identification sometimes transcended social categories of differentiation). But what happened after identification? Did identification with fictive characters contribute

somehow to change the way viewers' reflected upon and acted in their everyday lives? Beltrão leaves aside these kinds of question.

Fadul (1987), La Pastina and McAnany (1994), Vilchez (1997) and Tufte's (1993) discussions on methodology and the use of an ethnography of the everyday life to broaden the perspective of reception studies influenced, at an early stage, the way I designed my research questions and the methods for data collection.

Film and media studies scholar Thomas Tufte's book *Living with the Rubbish Queen* (2000) is situated within the theoretical framework of media ethnography. His aim was to investigate the role that telenovelas play in the everyday life of their audiences. Research was conducted in different periods during the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's, among low-income women in southern Brazil. Tufte uses the concept of "hybrid sphere of signification" – an intermediary zone between the spatial and the social, the material and the symbolic, the public and the private where he situates his informants' reception of telenovelas.

It is possible to draw several parallels between Tufte's work and my own. Both of us are convinced that ethnography can be used as a means to broaden the perspective of media studies. However, the paths through which we got to our findings, differ.

In what follows I fully explain my research methods and present a concrete suggestion on how ethnography can be used within the context of reception studies.

Approaches to Fieldwork[11]

Born and raised in Belo Horizonte, I came to Europe as a student at the age of nineteen. Several years later, then as a Ph.D. student at the university of Stockholm, Sweden, I decided to return to Belo Horizonte and make it the setting for my research. By choosing to conduct fieldwork at home, I was aware that I would have to deal with previous, biased, subjective knowledge on the field I was about to investigate. How should I handle this question?

I came to position myself as both an insider and an outsider in relation to my field. How could I ever pretend that I did not know anything about telenovelas? How could I ignore the fact that during my childhood and adolescence I laughed, worried and talked about these programs, their actors and characters? I decided to take advantage of my previous knowledge about telenovelas. My point of departure on the investigation of how people related to these programs had to be that of an insider: I started asking my old friends and acquaintances whether they knew anybody I could interview. I thus used their networks of acquaintances and relatives as informants (this technique is called “snow-ball sampling”).

Like Brasília, Brazil’s capital, Belo Horizonte was planned and built to become the capital of the state of Minas Gerais. The city was inaugurated in December 1897. It has today a population of approximately three million people. I rented an apartment in a, according to local standards, middle-class neighborhood: by coming in contact with my neighbors and by finding ways to participate in the everyday life of the *bairro*, I recruited a second sample of informants coming from varying socio-economical backgrounds.

In my walks up and down the neighborhood, I saw television sets almost everywhere: post-offices and banks had television sets installed in a corner of the wall, so people standing in queue could see (but often not hear) a telenovela re-run, commercials, a film or a talk show. It was very common to see television sets in bars and restaurants. Some of them were placed in a discrete corner, sometimes behind the counter (in this case they were for the staff, rather than the clients). In other cases, huge television sets could be strategically placed facing the bar’s tables. Some bars had a “sport profile” and their television sets were only tuned in to sport channels. Others, generally “family” restaurants, such as pizzerias, were tuned in *Globo*’s channel (the largest TV network in Brazil, and the fourth largest in the world). Sometimes, while running errands, I could follow, walking from block to block, the results of a football game or the dramatic quarrels of a telenovela couple. I just had to turn my head towards the places where people where sitting (or were supposed to sit) and there was a great probability that I would find a television set. It is important to keep in mind that television sets were not only domestic commodities exclusively found inside households – television sets were, through commercial establishments, disseminated throughout urban spaces, throwing their sounds and images towards pedestrians.

During fieldwork, I gathered a total sample consisting of forty-five persons – thirty-eight women and seven men. The majority of them, i.e., thirty-two persons, were aged between fourteen and thirty years. Informants occupied different social positions: thirteen of them had truly low incomes (about 100 *reais* a month, which corresponded to US$100), three of them came originally from low income families but ascended socially and economically, and the rest of them, i.e., twenty-nine persons, had higher educational levels and higher incomes. In 2001, I tried to compensate for the predominance of female informants by gathering 183 essays about telenovelas written by undergraduate university students at their first year of communication studies. Of these 183 people, 107 were women and 76 men, all aged between seventeen and forty years (with a majority aged between eighteen and twenty-two), coming from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Methods of Research

Throughout fieldwork I combined two major techniques to collect data: interviews (semi-structured and informal) and participant observation. Participant observation was a way to obtain access to the moments when media intercepted with viewers' everyday lives.

Influenced by an anthropological understanding of media, and convinced by the argument that practices of reception are not confined to the moment of broadcast (Ginsburg 1998), I decided to focus on a broad understanding of reception, and set to examine how viewers incorporated telenovelas in to their habits and daily practices. More precisely, I decided to investigate when, why and how themes related to telenovelas *spontaneously* came to the fore in everyday situations. By taking such a standpoint, I moved my focus away from the moment of broadcast (or from the places where immediate reception took place) to streets, parties, and everyday conversations and interactions.

The focus on non-immediate receptive processes made me realize that for the most part, informants' commentaries and references to telenovelas were fragmented and mixed with other topics and thought associations – telenovelas worked as a catalogue of images, landscapes, characters, names and persons that could be used to comment upon real events, places and persons. And the other way round, everyday events could also lead to

associations about fictive characters and situations. Moreover, I could also observe that viewers did talk about telenovela plots, their contents and characters, but they also talked extensively about telenovela actors, their diets, the spas they frequented, the food they ate, their gymnastic programs, their fashion, and their plastic surgeries. My informants were not only relating to a delimited and well-circumscribed program or text – the episodes of a telenovela – but to a series of entanglements and intersections that these programs had with other media and other domains of society.

While participant observation gave me access to the spontaneous ways in which viewers incorporated telenovela-related themes into their lives, I found that interviewing, on the other hand, allowed me to obtain more specific data about these same subjects.

I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews, most of them (seventeen) with women, aged from fifteen to forty-five. I booked a time and a place and arrived with my tape-recorder and with a list of questions that I intended to ask. This questionnaire was open to modifications and extensions, depending on the answers I got from my informants. The questions I asked were structured around three main topics: 1) Practices of watching and familiarity with the genre; 2) The relationship between fiction and reality, and the reception of the telenovelas' messages; 3) Reflections and representations on gender, sexuality, race and class.

All these interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Even if these interviews were important for my material, since they made people talk almost exclusively about subjects of my own choice, I felt that my informants often gave "official" answers to my questions, as if there was a right or even a politically correct way to respond. Many times, what people told me when the tape-recorder was on, totally contradicted things they had previously said, in more informal situations. So, in the last months of fieldwork, I started inserting the interview questions I had formulated into informal situations and conversations: for instance, if someone mentioned anything about the outfit of a telenovela character, I took the opportunity to ask this person's opinion about the impact of telenovelas: "How do you like this fashion?," "Are television and telenovelas a good fashion guide?" My idea was that people would thus talk in a more spontaneous and informal way about subjects which were directly related to my research interests. Using this technique, I came to gather many "structured conversations" on the most varied

themes. I also applied this method with some of the persons I had interviewed previously, since I interacted with them frequently in the course of my daily routine. These structured conversations (most of them were written down, not tape-recorded), combined with participant observation, contain much of my best information.

In 1997, during the six months period I spent in Belo Horizonte, eleven telenovelas were broadcast (ten of them at prime time, i.e., between seven and nine o'clock in the evening) from Monday to Saturday, on four commercial channels. Of these eleven telenovelas, two were imported from Mexico, and the rest was produced in Brazil. TV *Globo*, the major producer and exporter of the genre and the fourth largest television corporation in the world, broadcast five telenovelas daily. I video-taped several episodes from different telenovelas, several television programs, and gathered newspapers, magazines and articles about telenovelas. Most of the ethnographic material I gathered during this period contains references to four particular telenovelas:

- *Maria do Bairro*, a Mexican telenovela that tells the adventures and misadventures of Maria, a poor woman who marries a rich man. It was broadcast by *SBT* at 7:30 p.m.

- *Xica da Silva*, a Brazilian telenovela about Xica (pronounced 'Sheeka'), a female slave in Minas Gerais who became one of the most powerful women during colonial times. It was broadcast by *Manchete*, at 9:00 p.m.

- *Salsa e Merengue*, an urban, Brazilian telenovela that focused on varied kinds of interactions between people coming from different socio-economic backgrounds in Rio. It was broadcast by *Globo* at 7:00 p.m.

- *A Indomada* ("The Untamed Woman"), a telenovela with touches of magical realism about people living in Greenville, a fictive town colonized by Englishmen who came to northeastern Brazil. It was broadcast by *Globo*, at 8:30 p.m.

While ethnography allowed me to grasp and visualize the complexity of receptive processes, I then needed analytical tools that would help me making sense of these processes.

Key Concepts for Analysis

Flow: Anyone who has watched more than fifteen minutes of a Brazilian telenovela will notice that the stories depicted in an episode are often interrupted by commercial breaks. A typical telenovela is approximately 45 minutes long, divided by four commercial breaks, each of which lasts about five minutes. Each of these breaks is introduced and concluded by an audio-visual signal – a shortened version of the theme song and opening images that present the telenovela. Commercials and trailers of other coming attractions are shown in between these signals. Moreover, images and sounds of telenovelas are disseminated throughout social space by the presence of television sets in public areas, by written commentaries in the Brazilian press and by the participation of telenovela actors in the most diverse public arenas.

Literary scholar and media critic Raymond Williams (1974:90,96) observed that what is conventionally known as television programming, or listing, is in fact more than a succession of differentiated items or programs. Williams also noted that what is shown on television is a *flow* of diverse and loosely connected programs, constantly intercepted and interwoven with each other. He suggested that instead of analyzing how distinctive units or programs are watched by a certain number of persons, it would be interesting to approach the “characteristic experience of the flow sequence itself” (1974:95), where images and emotions are offered to viewers as a boundless and total experience.

Williams used the metaphor of flow to describe an immediate perception of television watching. Williams’ flow sequence has been a source of inspiration for other media researchers. Budd et al. (1985) for instance, did a content analysis of what they called a “television flow” – here meaning the combination of an episode of a certain American serial and the advertisements shown within that program’s commercial breaks. They found a structural coherence between the fictive narratives and the advertisement that immediately followed them. For instance, if there were children in the fictive narrative, there would be an advertisement with children during the commercial break. They concluded that advertisements profited on fictive narratives in order to promote their products. Altman (1986) focused on the commercial aspect of the television flow. Flow was seen as a way to keep viewers “plugged-in” to the television. Allen (1985) saw the narrative of soap operas as an example of a flow of sequences (sudden changes from

one plotline to the other). Jensen et al. (1994) used Williams' concept of flow to create different analytical categories (super-flow, channel flow, audience flow) in an attempt to understand the practices of television watching.

Because it works as an unfolding metaphor that can be used to describe processes of juxtaposition, transposition of meaning and interconnections, flow has also been a key word in anthropology and other social sciences (Castells 1989; Csikszentmihayi 1990; Hannerz 1992, 1997; Howell 1995; Kroeber 1952; Lash and Urry 1994).

Inspired by this metaphor, I decided to propose a new delimitation of *what* was being received by my informants, and I came to call that the *telenovela flow*. Telenovela flow stands for all the mass media commentaries (television programs, advertisements, newspaper articles) and spin-off products that intersect with the plot, characters and actors of telenovelas. The term telenovela flow is a way to describe a crucial part of my informants' receptive experience.

A Dialogical Perspective: Interested in tracing and understanding the connections, entanglements and interspersions that ran through the telenovela flow, and the way my informants related with this flow, I came in contact with the intricate and comprehensive work of Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin began writing in the 1920's but his texts have been considered to foreshadow major post-structuralist themes. Stam (1989:2) mentions some of these themes:

> "[T]he denial of univocal meaning, the infinite spiral of interpretation, the negation of originary presence in speech, the unstable identity of the sign, the positioning of the subject by discourse, the untenable nature of inside/outside oppositions, and the pervasive presence of intertextuality."

Bakhtin's theories about communication and the process of understanding are saturated with concepts such as re-accentuation (1999:87), intonation (1973:103), multi-accentuality (1973:23), and circulation (1999:162). These concepts focus on the points of contact between voices, utterances, persons and contexts. They highlight how utterances can be (and are) transposed from one context to another, in a dynamic commingling in which the involved parts constantly change.

Dialogism derives from the word dialogue but it aims at describing the mechanisms of interaction taking place between and betwixt voices, utterances/discourses/words, persons and contexts (Bakhtin 1970; Hill 1993; Holqvist 1999; Peytard 1995; Spitulnik 1996; Stam 1989). In the introduction to the second edition of the French translation of *Problems of Dostoïevsky's Poetics* (1929), published in 1970, Julia Kristeva relates the concept of dialogism to that of intertextuality:

> ”Le *dialogisme* voit dans tout mot un mot sur le mot, adressé au mot: et c'est à condition d'appartenir à cette polyphonie – à cet space ”intertextuel” que le mot est un mot *plein*.” (Kristeva in Bakhtin, 1970: 13).

I am aware that the concept of intertextuality, roughly defined as “the interanimation and interfecondation of texts” (Stam 1989:17), firstly suggested by Julia Kristeva (1967, 1970) parallels in many ways to some aspects of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. In my opinion, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, besides referring to the commingling and interfecondation of voices and texts (as in intertextuality), offers an interesting dimension to the study of reception mechanisms since it touches upon the interactive, “transindividual” (Stam 1989:17) processes in which meaning is generated.

From a media studies' point of view, dialogism offers a counter response to those researchers who described the processes of reception of a medium as one-sided, where media messages were said to exert a direct influence upon its receivers, thus imposing their supposedly homogeneous (and homogenizing) message upon a passive mass. Seeing the process of reception as dialogic means that we can analize how viewers socially position themselves and how they actively negotiate between messages which are themselves embedded with socio-cultural meaning, or, as Bakhtin would put it, messages that carry intonations or social accents.

It follows that the content of media messages can be seen in terms of conflicting or complementing voices – for example, the voice and political or moral profile of the broadcasting network, the voice of the socially positioned author who writes the text, and the voices of the characters within the text. To this combination and/or confrontation of voices within an utterance, Bakhtin gave the name of *polyphony*, or *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin 1970). Acknowledging such a complexity already at a textual level is a step

towards questioning the idea that messages of a certain media program are the same everywhere and for everybody.

Applying this discussion to the telenovela flow, it becomes possible to argue that the telenovela flow has a dialogical character, much in line with the idea of intertextuality: telenovelas are entangled with other television programs, advertisements, other media, and the most varied commodities. Voices circulate within the telenovelas flow, accumulating multiple layers of signification. For instance, throughout the eight months that the telenovela *A Indomada* ("The untamed Woman," 1997, *Globo*) was broadcast, many of its characters and actors/actresses participated in commercial campaigns for the most varied commodities. Eva Wilma, the actress who played Altiva [Greenville's moral crusader with a secret and not so angelic past], appeared in commercials for headache pills. Paulo Betti, the actor who played Ypiranga [Greenville's incompetent mayor] did commercials for a brand of washing machines (in a possible nod to illicit and corrupt practices of money washing?). The actor José Mayer, in the frame of his fictive character Teobaldo [a successful businessman of Egyptian origins], talked about the advantages of buying a certain car and about why one should trust a certain bank for its special services. By watching these advertisements, viewers get information about telenovelas that are being broadcast and about characters within those telenovelas. By looking at the products advertised, viewers get messages about fictive and real consumption practices. This chain of references and cross-references in constant and indefinite expansion, this circulation of voices from the plot of telenovelas to other domains of society, and the other way round – from everyday life to diverse media and to telenovelas, illustrates the dialogical character of the telenovela flow.

But there is more to it: by describing the processes of communication as context bound (utterances are enunciated and received from particular social positions and laminated with socio-cultural meanings), dialogism reinforces the necessity of studying media as interwoven with other social practices. In other words, the active role played by the viewer/receiver in the process of interpretation and use of media messages is acknowledged, at the same time that it is emphasized that these interpretations and uses are generated within particular socio-cultural contexts.

The concepts of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia* and the processes of *circulation*, *repetition*, *appropriation* and *reiteration* of meaning implied by them, can be used to understand the mechanisms at play in the telenovela flow and in viewers' reception of this flow: how and what messages are appropriated, circulated and reiterated by viewers?

These questions, in their turn, intersect with major issues within human and social sciences regarding the relationship between structure and agency, conditioning and creativity, individual and society: how are social practices generated and how are they reproduced, circulated and modified?

Having briefly described some key concepts guiding the analysis of my ethnographic material, I now propose to examine some of the ways in which people actually go with the telenovela flow.

Going with the Flow

Meire and the Telenovela Flow

Meire[12] was a nineteen-year-old woman who worked for a family as a live-in babysitter. We met because Meire lived and worked in the same building where I lived. Meire was light-skinned (or "light"/ *clara*, as she describes herself). She had long, curly hair (*cabelo anelado*)[13] that she kept tied in a bun during the time she was working so that it would look less frizzy when she untied it to go out. Meire came from a smaller city situated in the southern region of Minas Gerais.

She told me she saw babysitting as a temporary occupation. She wanted to take acting courses and learn about computers. In our conversations, Meire constantly asserted that, in spite of working as a babysitter, she belonged to another, higher class than her colleagues. She told me she came from a well-established family. Her parents could afford to have her stay at home, but she wanted to earn her own money and decided to move to Belo Horizonte, where an elder sister lived and worked. Meire said she earned two and a half minimum salaries, which was more than other babysitters earned (it still amounted to less than US$150/month).

Meire was very aware of class differentiation. Conversations about her consumption habits and social life were the means through which she marked her social positioning as being different from her colleague babysitters: she always made it clear to me and the other babysitters who were listening that she preferred to buy quality products and clothes, no matter what they cost.

She also had a boyfriend—"a rich boyfriend," she told me, who "owned his own car." She was proud of having "lots of clothes" (*tanta roupa*), so that she could always have a different dress for each party she was invited to (and she was invited to "at least one party every weekend").

Meire "hated to read" and the only exceptions to this were fashion magazines, because she "loved fashion." She also liked to watch telenovelas. Meire followed the plot of all of *Globo*'s telenovelas and she also watched two other telenovelas broadcast in other channels.

When I asked Meire her opinion about why so many people watched telenovelas, she answered:

"I think they want to learn something. *Novelas* show so many clothes, and then if people want to open a shop, then they look at the fashion in the *novela* and start to sell the same thing. So I think they watch to learn. There are lots of things to learn. And there are also lots of wrong things, too."

"And why do you watch?" I asked her.

"I watch to see different things, because here, in Brazil, there is nothing different to see…If you don't watch television, then you won't see [anything different]."

"And if you would write your own *novela*, what would it be about?"

"It would be a *novela* that would help people…a story about everyday life that you see out in the streets – people who trample upon other people. Some with lots of money, who won't give a cent to the other one who is lying on the ground…I would make a story that would help poor people."

As I have previously mentioned, television works as a common reference among Brazilian viewers. It is a means to spread messages and information throughout a country that is fractured by enormous social inequalities. When Meire affirms that "if you don't watch television, then you won't see [anything different]," she is representing a shared opinion among most of my informants: telenovelas work as a means to introduce new fashions (spas, clothes, looks), new technologies (computers, liposuctions, plastic surgeries) or simply "new stuff"(new unexplored landscapes, cars, household devices).

According to Meire, television programs (and telenovelas specifically) help viewers to gain access to information that is otherwise unequally distributed. Television and the telenovela flow translate unknown situations and milieus into recognizable events and places, offering viewers a cognizable basis for understanding and living within a complex and unequal Brazilian reality.

Most of the time, in our conversations, Meire related to the telenovela flow in terms of consumption—she "loved" its fashion and bought certain commodities that appeared on it. She related to the telenovela flow as an insider—she was acquainted with it and mastered many of its elements. Meire carefully scrutinized the dresses and hairstyles of telenovela characters and actresses and she spoke like an expert about the beauty secrets of telenovela actresses:

> Dinorá's hair [the name of a young prostitute who was cheated by a man who pretended to love her but who really just wanted her kidney, for a transplant, in *A Indomada*, 1997, *Globo*] is curly, but they wind it up in large rollers and then do a brushing. That's why it looks so long.

By circulating and appropriating certain commodities similar to the ones displayed in the telenovela flow (in her conversations, Meire referred quite often to things and commodities she either planned to acquire or had already acquired), by showing off her expertise about the beauty secrets of actresses and the fashions of this flow, Meire made herself recognizable (through her body and clothing style) as being someone with a somewhat more privileged socio-economical position (Bourdieu 1984). By being in constant dialogue with the telenovela flow, Meire appropriated certain legitimated consumption patterns and reiterated them as an effective way of blurring and downplaying her position as a (working-poor) babysitter. Her "rich boyfriend," who "owned

his own car," and all the parties to which she was invited, were presented as desirable effects (and evidence) of her successful appropriations.

Meire illustrates the context-bound, shifting, intertextual and interactive process of communication and production of meaning, to which Bakhtin gives the name of *dialogism*: by interacting with the flow she positions herself socially and negotiates between messages which are themselves embedded with socio-cultural meaning.

One evening, I met Meire sitting by herself on one of the benches in the building's playground. Something that happened in the elevator earlier that day had upset her. In the building where we lived, just like other residential buildings all over Brazil, there were two kinds of elevators: the "social elevator" ("*elevador social*," which in our building was decorated with marble floor and mirrors), and the "service elevator" ("*elevador de serviço*", which was not decorated at all). All the inhabitants of the building could use either of the two elevators, but there were also rules, some explicit and some implicit, governing the utilization of the elevators by non-residents or servants. An explicit rule was that the service elevator should be used to transport things (like grocery, furniture, suitcases and the like). A not so explicit rule was that workers, cleaners, maids and nannies as well as people coming from the outside whose errands were not of a social kind—such as electricians, plumbers, food deliverers, should take the service elevator. That day, Meire had taken the social elevator.

On her way up, she met a neighbor, a woman in her fifties, who asked Meire if the other elevator was out of function. When Meire answered that it was working, the woman remarked that Meire should, in fact, have used the "service elevator." In this instance it became clear to Meire that she had not been recognized as someone who could afford a middle-class life style. On the contrary, she was recognized as someone who had no place among marble and mirrors. Meire got upset. She told me she answered the neighbor's commentary by asking: "Why are you saying this to me? Is it because I am a mere domestic servant ("*uma empregadinha*")?[14] Deep inside our bodies, you and I both stink just as much. The only difference is that you have money. But, deep inside our bodies, we both stink."

She continued by telling me that “there are people who have money, but they don’t know how to do anything. Not even how to fry an egg. They depend on other people. Look, it’s just like Antonio Fagundes [a telenovela actor], in that *novela* [*O Rei do Gado*, “The King of Cattle,” 1996, *Globo*]. He was so rich. Then, once, he got lost in the jungle and he had to eat insects to survive. With all that money!”

This incident marked an interesting and momentary turn in Meire’s way of relating to the telenovela flow. In past conversations with me, she had basically related to it in terms of consumption, appropriating and circulating commodities and opinions that would help her to blur and downplay her low prestige position as a babysitter. In spite of her efforts (her hairdo, her dressing style, her accessories, all of which underscored her light skin), Meire was addressed and recognized as someone who should have taken the “service-elevator.” At this moment, she renounced all the indicators of status that had failed to make her recognizable as a neighbor (and not as a servant), and she urged the woman who addressed her as a babysitter to do the same thing: “Deep inside our bodies, you and I both stink as much. The only difference is that you have money. But, deep inside our bodies, we both stink.” Having failed to raise her own status, Meire tried to lower the status of her interlocutor. And Meire was happy with the effect of her comment : “You know, she didn’t say anything else! She just kept looking at me. Just like a fool (*feito boba*).”

Meire’s engagement with the telenovela flow reflects how viewers, in spite of being active producers of meaning, are bound to a Brazilian context which constrains their own opinions and actions.

Meire relates in two ways to the telenovela flow. First, she turns around and answers to a recurrent interpellation that runs through it—social differences are embodied and naturalized, but consumption focused on the body (fashionable clothes, cellular phone, hairstyle) can be a way to downplay class and at the same time give access to prestige (all the parties to which she was invited) and attractiveness (she had a rich boyfriend). Through her appropriation of elements from the telenovela flow, Meire tries to position herself within these hierarchical traditions, embodying an idea that she would later criticize: “if you don’t have anything, then you don’t count here, you can’t be someone.” In another instance, when Meire’s reiterations do not work, she refers to the telenovela flow

and to a special telenovela episode in order to suggest that individuals should have the same rights, in spite of their differing social positionings: “Deep inside our bodies,” Meire declared, “we both stink.” Meire’s appropriation and reiteration of elements from the telenovela flow is not simply the manifestation of naive consumerism, nor is it simply a sign of resistance. Relating with the telenovela flow is part of Meire’s search for ways of being and belonging.

Maria and the Telenovela Flow

The next case study to be examined here illustrates yet another possible way through which viewers engage with the telenovela flow. It is the story of Maria, a fifteen-year-old black girl who came from a small city in northern Minas Gerais, a poor and very dry region, populated by a few rich cattle farmers and great many poor people. Maria had not completed elementary school and she worked as a domestic servant in her hometown. One day, the family for whom she worked was visited by some relatives who lived in Belo Horizonte. Maria was invited by one of these visitors to come to Belo Horizonte and work as a babysitter in a friend’s home. Maria’s mother, who counted on her financial support to keep the household, did not allow Maria to accept this offer. But the following weekend, taking advantage of her parents’ absence (they were working in a farmer’s fields), she packed up her things and told the visitors that her parents had given their consent to her moving to Belo Horizonte. By the end of that same afternoon, she was sitting in a car with people that she barely knew, heading towards a city she had never seen, to live and work with total strangers.

Maria told me that a few weeks after her arrival, she wrote a letter to her mother, telling her where she was and what she was doing. She said that her mother wrote back a very angry letter, saying that she was coming to Belo Horizonte to take her home. But when Maria promised to send her fifty percent of the salary she earned (a full salary corresponded at the time to approximately US$110), her mother let her stay.

Maria was full of energy – eager to get a boyfriend, she anticipated with excitement the few occasions when she actually had time off and could go out. On these occasions, she would let her curl-relaxed hair down and she would put on a *roupa de sair* (party clothes)

– a mini-skirt and a T-shirt or a tight mini-dress, which showed off her home-made tattoos: a heart on her left thigh and something that looked vaguely like the letter "M" on her arm. While working, she sang, danced and taught all the latest *pagode*[15] songs to the two-year-old boy she took care of. After some months in the field, I started interviewing her about her television viewing. She showed great interest in being interviewed, and seemed to watch all telenovelas that were broadcast: from the re-runs, broadcast in the afternoon, to *Globo*'s five-, six-, seven- and eight o' clock telenovelas, and two other telenovelas broadcast on other television channels.

Since her working hours were not delimited by a time schedule, Maria worked practically all day long, more or less intensively. It is interesting to notice that in spite of her work (she took care of a little boy, but she was also supposed to do some household tasks such as cleaning and washing), she could, with varying degrees of attention, follow the plot of many telenovelas, listen to the radio, and see her favorite bands performing in variety shows. During her first months in Belo Horizonte, she did not know anyone in her age, neither did she know her way around the city. Therefore, she stayed at home a lot. Once she told me she had not gone outside the building's gate for a whole week. Watching television was her main source of entertainment. Of all the telenovelas she followed, her favorite was *Xica da Silva* [the story of a black female slave, Xica, historically known to have been the most powerful woman in the state of Minas Gerais on the second-half of the 19th century. The telenovela was broadcast by *Manchete*, in 1997]:

> I haven't missed one single episode. It's so exciting! I'm always hoping for Xica's best and I hate that Violante [a bitter, rich and mean white woman who was also the former owner of the slave Xica. Violante was supposed to marry João Fernandes, the rich and influential member of the Portuguese court in Brazil, but he fell madly in love with Xica and broke his marriage engagement.] (Excerpt from fieldnotes)

When Maria explained to me why she liked the telenovela *Xica da Silva*, she never explicitly touched upon the subjects of slavery and racism, which other informants thought were central.[16] When talking about *Xica da Silva*, Maria simply said that she liked Xica, the character, and hated Violante, Xica's worst enemy. Maria watched this

telenovela every evening, together with the family for whom she worked – a woman and her husband in their early thirties, the husband's mother, and Arnaldo, a two-year-old boy. As Maria told me, "Arnaldo is a little afraid of some characters from the *novela*, but he only goes to sleep after the *novela* is over."

During the daytime, Maria amused the other *babás* (babysitters) with stories that had several parallels with Xica's adventures. Just like many of my informants, Maria could comment upon a specially interesting event that took place in a telenovela and then connect this event with a similar situation she had witnessed or experienced without necessarily making explicit the articulation between reality and fiction.[17]

The other *babás* thought that Maria was a little crazy and that she lied a lot, but at the same time, they all enjoyed listening to her stories. Especially engaging were her stories about her relationship with Arnaldo's grandmother. Maria was afraid of being fired, because of a quarrel she had had with this old woman. According to Maria, this woman had called her a "black bitch" ("*nega safada*") to which Maria responded by calling the woman "an old granny with no man" ("*véia sem homem*"). The parallels between this interchange and those that took place between Xica and Violante are striking. Throughout the telenovela plot, Violante associates race to class and sexuality – she insistently reminds everyone that Xica was her former slave, and she accuses Xica of being an amoral, overly sexual beast. At the same time, Violante describes herself as being a wealthy, chaste and white virgin, perfectly eligible for marriage. Xica, on the other hand, emphasizes the fact that Violante despite all her money and influence is a "woman with no man," while Xica herself is together with João Fernandes, the most influential man in the region. Maria's quarrel with Arnaldo's grandmother and Xica's feud with Violante, as they were retold by Maria, highlight a very polemical subject discussed throughout Brazil, namely, the question of racialized notions of sexuality (where dark-skinned and/or non-white persons are described as more sensual and hot-blooded than white persons) and how these notions can be used in opposing ways: non-whiteness, sexuality and sensuality can, on the one hand, be connected to promiscuity and thereby opposed to an idea of family building and respectability. On the other hand, non-whiteness, sexuality and sensuality can be associated with passion, attraction, warmth, seduction and Brazilianess.[18]

Right before Maria's quarrel with Arnaldo's grandmother, Maria told us all that she was in love with someone whose name she did not want to reveal. She referred to her sweetheart as *Cara Pálida* ("Pale Face"). Maria had taken this expression from the character Cuca, in *Globo*'s six o'clock telenovela, *O Amor Está no Ar* ("Love is in the air"). Cuca, a white, very self-confident female circus-artist used this expression as a nickname for a dear male friend. *Cara Pálida*, in the telenovela, was a white, young upper-class man, who eventually fell in love with the circus-artist.

To appropriate, circulate and reiterate slang, idiomatic expressions, regionalisms and proper names coming from the telenovela flow is quite a common phenomenon.[19] Maria's appropriation and reiteration of the nickname *Cara Pálida* managed to amuse her babysitter friends and arouse their curiosity: "When are you going to tell us who *Cara Pálida* is?" they kept on asking Maria. In my eyes, Maria's appropriation and reiteration of "*Cara Pálida*" adds a new layer of signification to the term. Besides denoting different life styles (just like when the character Cuca used the term to call her upper-class friend), Maria's *Cara Pálida* drew one's attention to the actual color of the man with whom she was supposedly having a love affair – it was a "pale face," a man whose identity could not be revealed, but whose skin-color (and the class associations bound to it) were foregrounded.

After much suspense, and to everybody's surprise, Maria revealed that her very own *Cara Pálida* was the younger brother of her employer (and the youngest son of the old woman with whom she quarreled). He was white, in his late twenties, and had a fiancée. According to Maria's story, this man had openly declared his affection for her, when they were alone in the garage of the building where Maria and I lived. By talking very kindly to her, he told Maria that she was nice and beautiful, much nicer than his fiancée. They finally ended up kissing each other. Maria said that she even protested while hearing his declaration, and asked *Cara Pálida*:

> But what did you see in me? Your woman is white, she has long, straight hair. She isn't pretty, but everything else is fine…and I'm black (*preta*), with short, bad hair. And then he answered: "It's because you're happy, sensual…" and a lot of things like that. (Excerpt from fieldnotes)

Here again the parallels with Maria's favorite telenovela are striking: a white man ("Pale Face"), son of Maria's "worst enemy," had fallen for her because she was "happy and sensual," and much nicer than his white fiancée. Maria's words sounded almost like quotations from the dialogues in *Xica da Silva*. Despite that, and as I have previously pointed out, when commenting events from *Xica da Silva*, Maria did not touch upon the themes of racism and class differences, nor did she explicitly draw a direct connection between what she saw in the telenovela and what she experienced in everyday life. She simply jumped back and forth between fictive stories and her own stories, without acknowledging any explicit identification with her favorite character. Were her experiences of racism and subordination so painfully close to the ones in the telenovela that she refused to explicitly recognize them?[20] I cannot say, and I would have felt embarrassed asking her such an intimate, potentially face-threatening question. My embarrassment, and Maria's palpable silence on the question of race and the eventual parallels that could be drawn between herself and Xica da Silva, coincide with what anthropologist Robin Sheriff (2000) observed during fieldwork in a shantytown of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: the subject of racism was avoided in everyday conversations, even between people who knew each other well. Based on informants' elicited commentaries about their decision to avoid open discussions on the subject of racism, Sheriff suggests that silence "should not be read as an absence of political consciousness or knowledge" (2000:127). Instead it should be understood in terms of shame – a feeling that victims of certain kinds of physical or symbolic violence have when they think that they somehow provoked their attackers – blended with a wish to bypass and forget racist experiences, in an effort to protect oneself from emotional pain.

In this light, Maria's silence can be seen as a "perceptible lacuna," rather than a "mere absence" (2000:127). Respecting Maria's lack of explicitness, here I simply draw a parallel between *Xica da Silva*'s and Maria's stories: in both cases, fantasies of seduction and love are tied to class, race and sexuality. Romantic love challenges hierarchies of race and class, but it also seems to spring from racialized notions of sexuality where dark-skinned persons are described as more hot-blooded than white persons, and racialized notions of class, where whiteness is associated with wealth.[21] In both stories, subordination, racism, and sexual exploitation are transformed "through the idiom of

romance into a story about love" (Rebhun 1999:99). It is also important to remember that both Xica da Silva and Maria had strong feelings towards their *cara pálidas* and that an eventual alliance with such men was for them a way out of poverty.[22]

Since stories and actual cases of (often abusive) sexual relations between male bosses and their female maids, babysitters, cooks or servants were a common practice in colonial times and still abound in today's urban and rural Brazil, Maria's babysitter friends were in doubt about whether or not they should believe in her story. Was this just another example of Maria's craziness? "But this story was so full of descriptions and details that it could have been true," they all concluded. Maria was fired one week after her quarrel with Arnaldo's grandmother and no one ever got to know what really happened between her and *Cara Pálida*.

Regardless of whether or not Maria's story about her employer's brother had some basis in reality or was merely fantasy, I interpret her appropriation and reiteration of parts of the telenovela flow (the expression *Cara Pálida*, the fantasies of seduction, love and happiness) as a means for her to carry over the thrill of a telenovela plot to her own life-story, thus making it recognizable, legitimate and interesting. Maria's romantic story conferred a certain intensity to her life.

Maria's story can also be heard as an attempt to narrate herself as a complex subject – she might well be "*preta*, with short and bad hair," but a *Cara Pálida* told her that she was desirable. He kissed her. And so, still according to Maria's story, *Cara Pálida*'s love, just like the love stories of so many telenovelas, challenged (at least narratively) hierarchies of class and race.

Material and/or narrative appropriation of the fantasies of seduction, love and happiness from the telenovela flow can be a means to assert one's participation in, or one's knowledge of things that happen at a national and/or transnational level. Material and/or narrative appropriation can, on the other hand, be a way for informants to relate to the telenovela flow as a cognizable and recognizable basis for understanding and narrating one's own experiences.[23]

My point is that Maria's reiteration of elements drawn from the telenovela flow provides her with the narrative means through which she can transform her individual experiences into commonly shared and legitimized stories. Maria's case represents how informants engaged with the fantasies of seduction, love and happiness from the telenovela flow as a means to mold their own experiences in the shape of fictive, commonly and nationally shared acquaintances and stories. Her engagement with the telenovela flow was one means she had to make her own story recognizable, interesting and thrilling, much like a telenovela plot. Maria's narratives about how she attracted the attention of a desirable man, can be seen as a means to position herself, through her personal skills and assets, as a complex subject.

Conclusion

A main goal throughout this text has been to discuss how I, in an attempt to better grasp and understand people's reception of telenovelas, moved my research focus away from the moment of broadcast (or from the places where immediate reception might take place) to streets, parties, and everyday conversations and interactions. Ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to visualize a crucial – though messy and complex – part of my informant's receptive experience. I proposed the term *telenovela flow* to describe *what* viewers were actually relating to.

I adopted a dialogical perspective to make sense of that flow, and of how people related to it. I thus emphasized the processes of circulation, appropriation and reiteration of meaning taking place between and betwixt media texts and people.

The way viewers turn around and engage with messages coming from the telenovela flow varies extensively and reflects the tensions and contradictions that exist within contemporary Brazil. However, viewers' appropriation and reiteration of the telenovela flow is not free floating. It is tethered to particular socio-cultural values. I tried to illustrate that through two ethnographic case studies.

Even though the empirical material presented here is also tethered to a Brazilian, urban context, it is my conviction that the theories and methods with which I have engaged can

be applied to other contexts of media reception.

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[1] This discussion is based on information obtained from several academic studies about Brazilian television (Kehl 1986; Mattelart and Mattelart 1990; Mattos 1990; Silva 1997; Sodré 1977, 1997), its programming politics, its audience (Fadul 1993; Fachel-Leal and Oliven 1987; Girardello 1998; Micelli 1972) and its relation with the state (Kehl 1979; Santos Jr. 1996). This initial description serves a second objective, namely to start delineating the relationship between telenovelas and Brazilian society.

[2] In England, the BBC started broadcasting television programs on a regular basis in 1936. However, the spread of television technology around the world was intensified only several years after the end of World War II. In Sweden, for instance, the first official television broadcast happened in 1956.

[3] According to Mattelart and Mattelart (1990:19), in 1970, 73 percent of the country's industries were situated in the southeastern region.

[4] These magazines are published weekly or biweekly and are sold by subscription, in supermarket checkout racks, and at newsstands. *Contigo!* for instance, has a circulation of almost 250 thousand biweekly issues, and it cost R$3.90 in 1997.

[5] See also Lave et al. 1992.

[6] There is an ever-growing number of anthropological studies of media. See for instance Abu-Lughod (2005) and Butcher (2003). Since I am basically retelling the steps of my Ph.D. research (Machado-Borges 2003) I did not include these works in the present summary because they were not yet published at that time.

[7] Radway (1988:363) criticized the fact that many media researchers still initiated their "inquiry by beginning with texts already categorized as objects of a particular sort. Audiences, then, are set in relation to a single set of isolated texts which qualify already as categorically distinct objects. […]Such studies perpetuate, then, the notion of a circuit

neatly bounded and therefore identifiable, locatable, and open to observation. Users are cordoned off for study and therefore defined as particular kinds of subjects by virtue of their use not only of a single medium but of a single genre as well."

[8] DaSilva (1999) writes about race and symbolic exclusion in telenovelas. However, her focus lies on the content, not the reception of these programs.

[9] When it comes to the relationship between age and telenovela viewing, my material seems to confirm the findings of previous research (see also Hamburger, 1998, 1999)

[10] "Middle-class," "upper-middle class," and "lower class" are colloquially used as concepts for class differentiation in Brazilian Portuguese [*classe alta, classe media, classe baixa*]. I am not comfortable with a straightforward translation of the term *classe baixa* to "lower-class" in English, since this term carries a series of negative connotations. The term "working class" is also misguiding in the sense that even middle-class people are workers, even if their occupations differ from those of the "working poor" (O'Dougherty, 2002:46) Therefore, here I use the term "low-income women and/or men." The complexities of this discussion are beyond the scope of this paper.

[11] Fieldwork was conducted in the state of Minas Gerais, southeastern Brazil, during 1997 and 2000. 1997 was the most extensive period of fieldwork, when I spent six months in Belo Horizonte. After that, I returned to the field for shorter periods (generally a month), once a year.

[12] I use pseudonyms instead of the real names of my informants.

[13] See Fry (2000), Sansone (2003) and Wade (1997) for a discussion on skin-color and racism in Brazil.

[14] Empregadinha ("a little maid"): the diminutive form can at times be used pejoratively, meaning in this case "mere," "insignificant."

[15] Simpson (1993) explains this music genre as "a style of samba that begin developing in the late 1970s and during the 1980s reached huge audiences and sold millions of records" (p.84). A trend, since the mid-90's is to write *pagode* texts with a double

meaning. Texts can be sung as innocent songs about “cocks and chickens” or as allusions to sex. Every such a *pagode* has a special choreography that illustrates, also in a playful way, the double meaning of the song’s texts. Generally, when people dance to these songs, they reproduce the song’s choreography.

[16] Joana, twenty-eight -year-old housewife. Excerpt from an interview:

> All kinds of prejudice are discussed in Xica. They show how badly the slaves were treated. They were treated like beasts. And almost all the owners had sex with female slaves who had to accept that. It was terrible. They couldn’t refuse.

[17] Another example from my material illustrates the implicit articulation between themes discussed in telenovelas and everyday conversations: Meire, Marina (a nineteen-years-old babysitter) and I were talking about one of the latest episodes of the telenovela *O Amor Está No Ar* [”Love is in the Air”, broadcast by *Globo* in 1997]. One of the main characters in this telenovela, Luiza, the fiancée of Leo, was abducted by extra-terrestrials. During the time this young woman disappeared, Leo and Luiza’s mother were brought together and eventually started a love affair:

Thaïs: Tell me, is it just my impression or is Leo fond of Luiza’s mother? He wants her, doesn’t he?

Meire: If he wants her? He’s already got her!

Marina: Really? When did that happen?

Meire: Yesterday, at the end of the episode.

Marina: Oh!

Meire: I think it’s ok. Aren’t there many older men who marry younger women? What about the gays fighting for their rights to live together? If men are fighting to put an end on this kind of prejudice, why shouldn’t women and men of different ages be together?

Marina [is quiet but shakes her head, disagreeing].

Meire: Take Xuxa [a mega-star in Brazilian media] for instance. Her boyfriend is younger than her. I read this in *Caras*.

Marina: Yes, but she can't be much older than him… I once had a boyfriend who was seventeen years older than me. He wanted to marry me, but I was only fifteen… then I had another one who was also older than me, and who also wanted to marry me.

Meire [laughing]: If you had married him, you'd have at least three children by now…But once I dated a boy who was younger than me…no, he was my age, actually. It was so boring! He was so immature! We could not talk about anything.

Marina: Yes, women are more mature than men. That's why it's better with a man that is a little older than the woman.

By moving back and forth from fiction to everyday life, these women found the opportunity to tell private stories and express their moral opinions on subjects that were at least apparently related to the ones discussed by the telenovela.

[18] This double-edged notion of racialized sexuality, as anthropologist Donna Goldstein (1999) points out, seems to be applicable only to black or non-white *women*. The attractiveness of mixed-race and black men, Goldstein suggests, is not valorized to the same extent (1999:568). For a discussion on race mixture, sensuality and Brazilianess, see also DaMatta (1978); Freyre (1933); Parker (1991).

[19] Here are some further examples of the way informants appropriated and reiterated slang and idiomatic expressions that circulate through the telenovela flow: Márcio and Gustavo, both undergraduate students, appropriated the slang "*corpos malhados,*" "*corpos sarados*" that circulated through the telenovela flow to describe well-trained bodies, and thereby marked their position as up-dated, trendy and urban young men. Andrea, a thirty-year-old middle-class housewife had a dog called "Lindainês," after a character from one telenovela. Sandra, a nineteen-year-old housewife was called "Regina Duarte" [the name of an actress] by her cousins. Thelma, a fifty-year-old lower-class secretary was called, during a period in her life, by the nickname "Porcina," after a female telenovela character. Marina, an eighteen-year-old babysitter, told me that she was using the expression "*Pedro Afonso, meu filho*" ("Dear little Pedro Afonso"), to

playfully scold Ivan, the baby she took care of. “Dear Little Pedro Afonso” was a pejorative expression, used by a female character to scold and reprimand her oppressed husband. Marina’s reiteration provoked laughter among the people who heard her.

[20] Fachel Leal and Oliven (1987:91) raise a similar possibility when they try to understand the reasons why poor informants consequently excluded a fictive poor couple from their retelling of a telenovela plot. These authors suggest the idea of identification through denial: “one refuses explicit identification because it is too painful. It is through denial that the mechanism of identification is reinforced.” (My translation)

[21] For further discussions on the interplay of class, race and sexuality in Brazil, see Parker (1991) and Rebhun (1999). Wade (1993) approaches similar questions when he investigates the case of racism and race mixture in Colombia.

[22] Goldstein (1999) affirms that stories about upward mobility constitute a genre told by black low-income women in a shantytown in Rio. She examines a particular fantasy that circulated in the everyday conversations among these women – a fantasy of upward mobility (or at least of an economic improvement in their lives) through the seduction of older, richer, and usually whiter men. Goldstein compares these women’s fantasies to the plots of telenovelas:

> This particular theme is not unique to these women, but is rather part of the mainstream; economic mobility through marriage and /or sexual seduction is a favorite theme in Brazilian telenovelas […] In these telenovelas, the class-based motivation for seduction of a wealthy patron is a familiar scenario […] (1999: 570).

[23] Rebhun (1999:202) comments that the story [from the telenovela *Tieta*] rang true with many of her informants. She quotes one of them:

> In my family it’s the same as in the *novela*. The history of my grandfather is the following: He left Grandma and went to live with the other woman. He left her with nine children. So she always remained his friend, sent food to him, everything. But Aunt Maria, who was a teenager at the time, never accepted it. No way. She kept crying, saying that he was no good, everything.

So the woman died. He's already old, returned to live with Grandma. It's all right with her. But Aunt Maria, who never married, who still lives at home, she doesn't talk to him, no. She doesn't even look in his face. For her, she doesn't have a father. There was no way. He had to leave there. Daughters never accept the other woman. It has to be either the mother or her. He can't love anyone else (Catrina, thirty-two-year-old, secretary).

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