

Can Telenovelas be Cult TV?: An Audience Perspective

Clarice Greco

Paulista University, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

This article applies the concept of cult TV to Brazilian telenovelas. The term cult TV is used to refer to products that were perceived to be different from mainstream popular culture. However, theoretical contexts have started to embrace the notion of a mainstream cult. With the concept of a mainstream cult in mind, I will argue that some telenovelas are responsible for occasioning a ritual which forms a national community, and could thus be considered cult for three main reasons: they can acquire nostalgic appeal; they can present aesthetic innovation even within a classic format; and they sometimes engender a type of audience engagement that stands out from other productions. This third reason will be addressed closely from the perspective of the audience, arguing that their opinion on what is a cult should be considered in relation to the academic debate around the concept. Amongst the main results, I highlight the identification of telenovelas as popular productions that may be considered cult TV, and the growing importance of common sense understandings for our consideration of concepts in the field of Communications.¹

Keywords: Cult TV. Telenovela. National community. Fans.

¹ In this article, the notion of common sense refers to non-scientific everyday knowledge that includes vernacular understandings and day-to-day expressions. The concept here relates less with Gramsci's idea of ideology within the working class and more with Kant's use of the *Gemeinsinn* in relation to an innate collective ability to the judgements of taste. Therefore, according to Martins (1998, 3) 'common sense is common not because it is banal or mere or exterior knowledge. But because it is shared knowledge among the subjects of the social relationship'. For Lopes (2010), considering the common sense as popular understandings reduces the distance between the symbolic and cultural power of the specialists and lay people through the construction of a "collective investigator", which considers other levels of knowledge. My argument about cult telenovela is based on the opinion and interpretation of viewers, which I call 'common sense' as I believe it is the type of knowledge that should be considered essential for empirical and theoretical findings regarding the viewers' taste and the audience itself.

Introduction

After numerous theoretical attempts to define what is ‘cult TV’, many authors (Eco, 1985; Abbott, 2010; Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, 2004; Lavery, 2010; Le Guern, 2004) associate the concept either with the specific character of certain productions or with the audience’s behaviour, most often in relation to non-mainstream productions. In general terms, cult productions would be those offering innovative content or those generating a high degree of devotion from fans (especially from a niche audience).

The above-cited discussions of cult TV are from the Northern Hemisphere, where the term is associated largely with US or British programmes (classic examples being *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, and *The X Files*). These productions have engendered niche audiences (sometimes referred to as ‘nerds’) that are often unlike those seen in South America, where the fan devotion is largely around mainstream shows (like telenovelas). This highlights the need for a turn to the epistemologies of the South (Santos and Meneses 2010) to discuss the concept of cult TV in the Brazilian and overall Latin American context in order to ascertain whether telenovelas², Brazil’s main TV product, have the potential to become cult TV. This begs a discussion of what the term cult TV might mean in the South American context.

In this essay, I will consider the applicability of the term cult TV to Brazilian telenovelas – something that is already apparent in viewers’ everyday conversation. I will explore the elements that might characterise them as such, whether this is derived from their nostalgic value, from their production characteristics, or from fan engagement. I start by reviewing existing definitions of cult TV and how these might relate to mainstream programmes, then I contextualise the telenovela phenomenon and its specificities in Brazil. Following this review, I will discuss empirical data from a two-step research project involving a survey and focus groups that revealed the telenovelas Brazilian viewers considered to be cult; and the reasons the telenovela fans gave for why these productions were selected. Based on the debate within the focus groups the telenovelas mentioned are discussed in accordance with the three possible meanings of ‘cult’ that emerged – namely, nostalgic cult, aesthetic cult, and contemporary cult – thus revealing the versatility and the uses of the concept of cult TV in the national context.

² Telenovelas are the most important TV fiction format in Latina America. They are different from soap operas, although the confusion between the two formats is frequent. Like soap operas, telenovelas present fictional narratives originated from melodrama and are broadcast daily. However, they have around 180 or 200 chapters, lasting for seven or eight months, while soap operas usually last for years or even decades. Since the 1990s, Brazilian telenovelas have also presented more complex characters and mix of genres, such as thriller, police procedural and fantasy.

Cult TV: from niche to mainstream

The expression 'cult TV' stems from the cult effect. Some authors, such as Mathijs and Mendik (2008), claim that the cult film audience emerged towards the end of the 1950s with post-WWII art films and the theatre movements which developed as the number of traditional cinemagoers shrunk. That led some venues to cater to a small audience that was highly educated and economically exclusive as well as constrained within specific metropolitan areas. Cult films thus came to be understood as those that gathered a group of distinguished, devoted, and organised fans. As TV became more popular, the logic of cult cinema started to be applied to TV programmes as well.

To this day, however, the classification of cult films and TV programmes shows signs of inconsistency and divergence amongst authors. The literature on TV and cinema studies approaches the topic in diverse and diverging ways. The term is, at times, used in reference to production and, at others, in relation to the audience or even to describe the narrative genre – in the last case, particularly associated with various genres such as horror, sci-fi, or fantasy although very rarely applied to melodrama.

The first conceptualisations of cult were based on a distinction from what was perceived to be popular and ordinary. According to Pearson (2010), the term 'cult' 'is often loosely applied to any television programme that is considered offbeat or edgy, that draws a niche audience, that has a nostalgic appeal, that is considered emblematic of a particular subculture, or that is considered hip' (Pearson 2010, 7). This definition would inevitably exclude telenovelas from the concept of cult TV as they attract a national audience that includes people with many social differences and who are, therefore, not a niche audience.

On the other hand, Le Guern (2004, 10) adds that a 'cult' production unifies by producing viewership communities that are often associated with niche audiences, but that it might also unite members from the same generation, thus acquiring a countercultural value. He goes on to claim that this relationship is made manifest through the practice of rituals. These definitions are admittedly useful for this article as they offer the possibility of opening up the concept of cult TV to realities that are different from those in the Northern Hemisphere and which can be found in Brazil in relation to telenovelas. Even though they are the country's most popular cultural product, telenovelas represent the attribution of symbolic value, unifying the national culture as they express, as Lopes (2003) suggests, a "narrative of the nation" enabling a ritualistic manifestation, as I will argue later.

At the turn of the century, authors such as Hills (2002) suggested that it was not possible for there to be a cult soap opera. Eight years later, Lavery (2010) included two soaps in 'The Essential Cult TV Reader' which revisited programmes considered cult by scholars in the field. Hills himself later said in an interview (Hills, 2015) that he had reconsidered the premise and admitted to the possibility of soap operas and telenovelas becoming cult. For Lavery (2010), this issue became prominent in debates surrounding cult media in the twenty-first century. The boundary between the cult and the popular became blurred,

which, for Williams (2013), is one of the main advances in the theorisation of the concept. Thus, divergence of opinion and the heterogeneity of examples that have been consecrated as cult in the international scenario highlight that if some people believe in the cult aspect of a production, they are free to interpret it as such. This opens up a space for the audience's opinion to be taken into account.

Another point to be taken into account when deconstructing the concept of cult is suggested by Abbott (2010) who highlights the importance of productions that are not necessarily perceived as cult but that have inspired the worship and enthusiasm of fans throughout the years. Sharing a similar opinion, Jancovich and Hunt (2004) question the critical distinction between cult fans, and those viewers who are not part of an organised fandom. Thus, cult fans would be the ones inside formal communities, whose worship could be defined by hierarchies and disputes of power. However, could the affection for this object overcome power? If a cult programme is mainly defined by the devotion of a group, why can't random fans of a TV show decide whether it is a cult or not? In order to answer these questions I decided to consider the vernacular understandings (represented by the opinions of telenovela fans) in order to investigate alternative ways to define cult. In the case of telenovelas, I also aimed to discover which (if any) Brazilian telenovelas the fans would consider cult.

Brazilian Telenovelas

First, I would like to address again the notion suggested by Le Guern (2004) that a cult show might unite members from the same generation, acquiring a countercultural value, and that the manifestation of this relationship is expressed through the practice of rituals. This suggestion is relevant here because telenovelas in Brazil play a major role in the construction of a sense of national community. In the section that follows, I will address some ideas about watching telenovelas as a form of ritual that may contribute to the ways in which these shows may be perceived as components in a mainstream national cult.

Watching telenovelas is a ritual. Ever since Hegel's statement about reading the newspaper being akin to a morning prayer for the modern person, there have been theoretical reflections on everyday media rituals that have undoubtedly included television. Indeed, Reis (2012) believes that mass communication in contemporary society would eventually come to replace the central role that religion and ritual occupied in pre-modern societies since it has become 'the guardian of a new and secular ritualisation of everyday life' (Reis 2012, 207). In Latin America, this role is performed by television and in particular television dramas which occupy an important place in the culture. In Brazil, perhaps the best example of the social ties created by the media is the phenomenon of telenovelas – the epitome of Brazilian television. Given this specificity, Lopes (2003) characterises telenovelas as a narrative of the nation, activating mechanisms of conversing, sharing, and partaking in

an imagined nation. In other words, telenovelas promote national unity and identity, akin to the function of religious cults in traditional societies.

Telenovelas run daily. Back in the 1970s, Globo, Brazil's largest network, established what we now call 'telenovela time'. The fixed times in the network's schedule determined the daily broadcast of three telenovelas: one at 6pm, one at 7pm, and the final one at 8pm – the latter preceded by the news. In that way, it introduced viewers to the habit of watching the same programme at a specific time. This ended up determining dinner time, the habit of leaving the house after the telenovela, and even bedtime. The ties created by this 'telenovela time' refer back to the weekly habit of going to mass, though daily. Silverstone (1994) believes that the idea of the ritual as an everyday habit is important for it is, in this very same everyday routine, that individuals build and maintain their identities, manage their social relations in time and space, share meanings, fulfil their responsibilities, and experience pain and pleasure at different levels. People therefore avoid the panic of threats breaking with the security of routine. This also happens when they watch programmes that have the security of daily rites.

Telenovelas provoke communication. Besides the idea of ritual as routine, Carey (1992) argues that all rituals begin with conversation and social exchange, adding that it is in this space that communication meets its highest and most original manifestation. The ritualistic perspective is based on Durkheim's ideas about the elementary forms of religious life and his argument that the sacred links with collective force, which is a representation of society itself. Carey also understands communication as a fundamentally participatory ritual, in and through which we generate, maintain, and transform culture. If, years ago, family and friends would get together in the lounge to watch TV, today they do so on social networks, commenting on what they see on the screen. More than ever, media consumption can be seen as a shared ritual, especially online. Viewers debate TV content in digital communities, often in more depth than when viewing in person. This can be associated with the old habit of discussing TV, or newspapers, but on a different platform. As Silverstone puts it, 'traditions may change but tradition remains' (Silverstone 1994, 21). Thus, if the ritual is based on tradition, online conversations are no more than traditions, reinvented. This partaking in the imagined or virtual group characterises a persistence of tradition in modernity, in parallel with Weberian approaches to the disenchantment of the world.

Telenovelas invite participation. Besides their value to everyday habits and the formation of communities, telenovelas introduce issues that precede or accompany discussions in Brazilian society, ultimately engaging with them. For Lopes (2004), despite being melodramatic narratives, telenovelas are accepted as credible, seen and appropriated as legitimate. This allows telenovelas to not only have a role for the individual but also a social role in that they spark reflection about values and morality.

Telenovelas form communities and contribute to a shared national imagined community (Lopes 2004). Telenovelas are ultimately responsible for creating a shared cultural repertoire as well. Le Guern (2004) mentions the case of *Titanic* (1997) when arguing that cultural relations with cult objects are spaces of genuine social and cultural

interaction. Even when texts are accused of lacking artistic legitimacy (as in the case of a Hollywood blockbuster or even a telenovela), they are invested with identity aspirations and they unite members of the same generation around a shared lifestyle. In responses to my survey, telenovelas were mentioned by more than one respondent thus highlighting the common experience of a shared memory about this national product. In this sense, by considering the characteristic of a cult production in the creation of a common repertoire that generates social and cultural ties, the issue of both affective and symbolic relations between audience and product comes into play.

Therefore, telenovelas establish a ritual in the strictest sense of the word – that of an everyday habit, as Silverstone (1994) – and even Hegel – suggested with regard to newspapers and morning prayers. However, they also create a feeling of collectivity, belonging, and identification –as proposed by Durkheim (2000) and Carey (1992). Telenovelas thus operate as narratives that have implications for national values and morality, as White argued in reference to myths (White 1994), creating a repertoire to be shared nationally.

This is why I argue that it is possible to identify some telenovelas as cult TV. There are clearly theoretical challenges to this argument, since theories from the Northern Hemisphere are not readily applicable to the Brazilian reality. One example being the length of programmes on television. Many US and British TV series that have been consecrated as cult are on for many years while Brazilian products are for the most part shorter. A telenovela will run for about eight months, whereas *Doctor Who* recently celebrated fifty years on the air, and *Star Trek* has been made into a TV series, films, and magazines that have been published for many years. This is not the case with telenovelas, as they end and are immediately followed by another one, which might or might not be as successful as its predecessor. When a telenovela ends, viewers may go on to the next title, but they keep memories of those that impressed them the most. For this reason, those that for some reason linger in people's memories are more significant even if they ran for a relatively short period of time. As I shall argue, memory and ritualistic importance are some of the most substantial ingredients for defining certain telenovelas as cult.

Likewise, it would be possible to think of a taxonomic issue surrounding the biggest cult programmes. Devoted fans of *Star Trek* are called trekkies or trekkers. *Doctor Who* fans are whovians and those of Sherlock, sherlockians or holmesians (among other variations depending on the fandom). In Brazil it is not usual to coin a term for the organised fan group of a certain telenovela or series, although those who watch telenovelas are called *noveleiros*. This nomenclature, therefore, refers to the avid viewers of this format. The object of worship is, to a certain degree the telenovela as a genre.

Knowledge of the symbols from the fictional world of telenovelas can also be seen in the countless elements or objects that inform music and fashion trends. US and British cult programmes are known for having derivative brands: Darth Vader action figures, *A Clockwork Orange* T-shirts, or the endless list of *Doctor Who* memorabilia. Brazilian equivalents are the objects and products that derive from telenovelas, such as: the Lurex

socks from *Dancin' Days* (Globo 1978-1979); the turbans worn by Viúva Porcina, a character in *Roque Santeiro* (Globo 1985-1986); and the eyeliners inspired by Jade, the main character in *O Clone* (Globo 2001-2002) – to name a few. Some telenovelas have launched their own brands, such as the lipstick Boka Loka from *Ti-Ti-Ti* (Globo 1989); as well as the perfume *Vereda Tropical* and cachaça *Saramandaia*, named after telenovelas by the same name. There have also been international instances of such derivative use, such as the independent restaurants launched in Cuba by the name of Paladares, in reference to a chain by the same name in the telenovela *Vale Tudo*.

Thus emerge icons of a local and exported subculture that capture the practical influence of telenovelas. This does not mean that these icons have a direct connection with the concept of cult, but they have been mentioned here to highlight the symbolic and practical reach of the intimate relationship between viewer and telenovela. Such products might well be considered symbolic examples or even first indications of cult in sociocultural as well as, certainly, commercial terms. However, the latter does not invalidate the former for cult can find, in profit, an important dimension, especially if we acknowledge that consecrated international programmes are not free from the profit-oriented activities of the culture industry.

That is, besides the act of watching telenovelas, people can identify and establish longstanding emotional ties with plots or characters. These ties prompt a personal relationship with some telenovelas in such a way that they are turned into affective memories. This affection acquires collective dimensions as the same productions are watched and cherished by millions of individuals, lingering in the memories of those who watch them as well as being incorporated into the national, collective memory – on which I shall expatiate next.

What fans say about cult telenovelas

In 2015 I conducted a research project that included an online survey as well as focus groups, to find out if viewers considered any telenovelas to be cult (Greco 2016). The survey was guided by the notion that common-sense perception is not extrinsic to everyday life but, rather, intrinsic – and, in this case, the very reflection of daily parlance on social networks. Therefore, as Bachelard (1972) argues, vernacular understandings should not be excluded from the scientific field but incorporated and relativised in empirical research. This fits our case regarding the notion of cult, since the expression is in fact associated with the manifestation of the audience. Thus, their opinion is worth hearing and taking into account when discussing their involvement with a production. Besides, the fans themselves are the ones who use the term cult (sometimes as slang), so understanding the meanings of this use is important as well.

The data presented in this article come from the responses to one question asked online: 'Which telenovelas, from any period, do you consider to be cult?' . The decision to

ask a single question was a methodological experiment to gather a higher number of answers. We do not know, thus, who the respondents are, since no profile data was requested. The question was applied as a Google form to Facebook communities which discussed telenovelas and also on my personal profile on Facebook and Twitter, leading to many shares from different kind of people somehow linked to me. After collecting the answers, the ten most mentioned telenovelas were discussed in two focus groups.

There were 346 responses to the survey that mentioned 78 telenovelas. Some people (7%) answered ‘None’, perhaps in line with the idea that popular programmes cannot be considered cult. However, this is still a significant, though not dominant, figure as the majority of responses (93%) did, in fact, mention at least one title. This indicates that respondents at the very least acknowledged the existence of a cult telenovela. Table 1 reveals which telenovelas were most cited. The telenovelas receiving the same number of mentions are organized alphabetically.

Table 1. Telenovelas most cited as cult

	Título	Ano	Menções
1	Roque Santeiro (Roque Santeiro)	1985	60
2	Que Rei Sou Eu? (Which King am I?)	1989	31
3	Avenida Brasil (Brazil Avenue)	2012	27
4	Vale Tudo (Anything Goes)	1988-1989	27
5	Vamp (Vamp)	1991-1992	23
6	O Rei do Gado (King of Cattle)	1996-1997	14
7	Lado a Lado (Side by Side)	2012	12
8	Meu Pedacinho de Chão (My little peace of Ground)	2014	12
9	O Bem-Amado (O Bem-Amado)	1973	12
10	Saramandaia (Saramandaia)	1976/2013	12

The first result inviting attention is that all telenovelas in the top ten are from Globo, the leading TV producer and channel in Brazil. Another noticeable result relates to temporality. Only three telenovelas were recent productions: *Brazil Avenue*, *Side by side* and *My Little Piece of Ground*, that had been aired in the past three years. The other productions were originally exhibited in the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s – however, they had been on TV as reruns or remakes in the five years that preceded the survey. This could mean that the viewers’ memories may have old roots, but they were likely to have been affected by the recent TV scheduling. From an opposite perspective, it could mean that TV keeps running these shows because they are already part of an established memory for the audience.

In order to investigate the characteristics that made these productions be considered cult by the respondents, two focus groups were carried out. The intention was to discuss with fans of telenovelas what they understand by ‘cult’ and their assessments of the titles

most mentioned in the questionnaire, in an attempt to classify them for analysis. Participants were chosen from among the survey respondents and by profile similarities in order to mark that the understandings from the group would refer to a specific sample. All participants in the focus groups were self-declared fans of telenovelas.

Focus Groups

The focus group is a type of collective interview with the purpose of deepening the comprehension about a specific topic or product. In the focus group, the level of analysis is the group itself. Thus, if an opinion is outlined, even if it is not shared by all, for the purpose of interpreting the results it is referred to as the group’s opinion (Gondim 2003, 152). However, it is worth explaining the differences of opinion and disagreements within the group. According to Gondim (2003), it is important to form groups with similar characteristics, as a group with similarities in age and social class helps to understand the opinions of this group. It is pertinent to remember that qualitative research is intended to deepen or test hypotheses, with no intention of generalizing the results (Lopes 2005).

I held two focus groups in 2015: one in Belo Horizonte (BH) and one in São Paulo (SP). The first group gathered eight participants invited through social networks, with a preference for those who had answered the questionnaire. The intended characteristics were those of young adults, 25 to 40 years old, with a high level of education (at least undergraduate degree).³ The invitation was sent from one member to the other, thus many of the participants (5 out of 8) knew each other. For the first group, the professional practice area was not pre-established. The second group comprised six professionals in the fields of humanities, social sciences or communication with a view to investigating whether the change in the group’s profile would alter the members’ perceptions. However, there was an unforeseen event with two of the participants who did not appear, and so they were replaced by a biologist (who calls herself a nerd and fan of cult series). The invitation was also sent through social media, and only three of the six participants knew each other.

Table 2 – Focus Groups Participants

Focus Group I (BH)

Nome	Idade	Profissão
Mayara	32	Vet
Rafael	38	Lawyer

Focus Group II (SP)

Nome	Idade	Formação
Ivo	26	Sociologist (mestrando)
Camila	31	Designer

³ The profile was determined based on three main reasons: 1. The recommendation that participants of a focus group should have similar characteristics; 2. The fact that the expression ‘cult TV’ was used more often among young adults (GRECO, 2013) and 3. The fact that the questionnaire was applied through Facebook and the start point was the researcher’s profile, attracting therefore a circle of respondents with similar background.

Lucas	31	Physical education físico
Nayara	32	Lawyer
Cláudio	32	Computer Science
Liliane	32	Physical education
Tais	30	Lawyer
Carol	32	Journalist

Gian	37	Cultural Producer cultural
Julia	29	Psychologist
Bárbara	31	Journalist
Carla*	32	Biologist (PhD)

Although I presented questions, in both groups the discussion progressed spontaneously. The participants were able to maintain conversation without constant need of the moderator, who intervened only to raise the questions that guided the debate or when the discussion started to take an unproductive direction for research purposes. As the debate took its course, it was common to have one participant interrupting another and/or completing each other's sentences while agreeing. This made it hard to highlight a long quotation, which is why I chose to share a summary of the main ideas below.

The initial question was: 'What do you understand by "cult"?' In the first group, most responses brought up elements such as temporality and nostalgia. Nayara (BH) for example said it was 'something that was tacky, but now it's in fashion'. Cláudio (BH) replied, believing that 'it has more to do with temporality than with quality, such as productions that would become cult over time. For example, Telecine Cult. Sometimes what is aired on Telecine cult would not be considered cult at the original moment.' All participants agreed, at first, that the cult aspect was related to time, to old objects or productions.

Further in the conversation Taís (BH) addressed the textual issue, saying that cult would be something 'different from the traditional, due to its philosophical or critical approach.' Whereas Carol believes that 'For a telenovela to be cult I guess it needs to have a different aesthetic, something more 'gourmetized'. The others expressed agreement, confirming that it would be something that goes beyond the 'normal' line, in a more in-depth or innovative way. Nayara (BH) exemplifies this with the example of 'Zé do Caixão', a Brazilian cult trash character, bringing the idea of innovation to an aesthetic approach.

In the second group, the first answer spoke of 'things that become better after a certain time' (Ivo, SP), referring to temporality. Camila (SP) disagreed, arguing that this can happen, but it is not a rule. 'I understand cult as something that goes out of the standard and differs, at least a little, from what we are used to seeing' (Camila, SP). Carla (SP) proposes a new vision for believing that cult is something that stands out in a certain social group or niche and cites the sci-fi genre. In that sense, it does not need to be something innovative or non-standard, but striking for a group. In other words, she referred to what is 'emblematic of a particular subculture' (Pearson 2010, 7). All participants in São Paulo agreed that popularity is not a determining factor in defining the cult.

Participants' profiles may have set differences between the two groups. In the first group (BH), the opinion of the majority placed the cult in opposition to the popular, as argued by the first theorists of the subject. Only with the continuity of the examples and

dialogues did they admit the probability of combining the two qualities. The second group (SP), in contrast, had already pre-established the possibility of a mainstream cult, consistent with the second wave of studies.

After this first round of debate, I read out the telenovelas most mentioned in the questionnaire and asked the participants to talk about them. At first, the participants of the first focus group disagreed with *Avenida Brasil* (*Brazil Avenue*, 2012) being the 5th most mentioned as a cult telenovela. They argued that it was recent and extremely popular and hence it could not be cult. In the end, however, they admitted that it was remarkable and commented on the ‘atmosphere of a World Cup final’ that was established in the Country due to the empty streets and people gathering in bars to watch the chapter on a big screen. One participant even said, at the end of the conversation, that she changed her mind and would now consider *Avenida Brasil* a cult. In the second group, however, only one participant disagreed with the presence of *Avenida Brasil* in the ranking, as she felt the lack of eccentric, iconic or cartoon characters (a point with which another participant disagreed), defending *Avenida Brasil* for its strong plot and its impact on the audience and for the aesthetics of the production, the lighting, and the noir ambience. ‘I even think that Carminha (the main villain) represents an icon of national television, she has the ability to throw a child in the trash, I think it’s the worst thing anyone can do, and turn that into charisma’ (Camila, SP).

An interesting detail was the perception of a certain level of ‘defense’ of the favorite telenovela, which is a typical behavior of fans. Camila (SP) says that she will ‘defend *Avenida Brasil*’ and Bárbara (SP) says that she ‘votes for *Roque Santeiro*’ as the most cult among the answers to the questionnaire. This feeling is similar to what Peary (1981) reports about cult film fans, who claim that ‘their favorite films are the most intriguing, unusual, outrageous, mysterious, absurd, challenging, fun, erotic, exotic, and-or better films of all time.’ (Peary 1981, xiii).

Regarding other telenovelas, *Roque Santeiro* attracted a supportive reaction from both groups, who recalled the strong religious symbolism of the narrative and the character Sinhozinho Malta with his slogan ‘Am I right or am I wrong?’. Ivo (SP) associated *Roque Santeiro* and *Vale Tudo* (*Anything Goes*, 1988-89) with the idea of classics, as they are emblematic of an era, acquiring status and prestige even within newspapers where no one would write about telenovelas before. The same participant also mentioned the myth in *Roque Santeiro*, the construction of an idol that did not exist, as a portrait of Brazilian religiosity (Ivo, SP). Gian (SP) mentioned the relevance of the original exhibition dates, the post-censorship environment and the country’s vulnerable political situation. Participants started to remember characters and songs from the soundtrack, on a collective trip to the past of telenovelas.

About *Vale Tudo* (*Anything Goes*, 1988-89), the participants believed it was mentioned in the questionnaire because of its political criticism, the characters and the emblematic mystery ‘Who killed Odete Roitman?’. The groups referred to telenovelas that ‘transcended’ time, questioning why these telenovelas stayed strong on their memories. The

participants believed that it is because they had striking characters, some outstanding element or because they deal with subjects never addressed in previous telenovelas. These productions had their elements of temporality, memory and nostalgia highlighted, whilst other productions were addressed for their content, textual or imagery characteristics.

All participants, from both groups, agreed with *Que Rei Sou Eu?* (*Which King Am I?*, 1989) being cult, for combining the elements considered important by them: being a satire, being relatively old, presenting unusual aesthetics (such as costumes) and political criticism, as well as having a narrative formula that goes beyond the original context.

In relation to *Vamp* (*Vamp*, 1991-92), the group from São Paulo had a surprisingly humorous reaction, agreeing that it was innovative due to the 'trash aesthetic' and for attracting teen fans. The group from BH claimed *Vamp* should be considered cult for its fantasy genre and also the 'trash' aesthetic, and remembered the 'one-tooth vampire', which added a comic element to a supposedly horror character. According to the group from BH, *Vamp* 'became a cult' over time. They also addressed the innovation that is typical of telenovelas broadcast at 7 o'clock.

The participants of both groups also spoke about the magic realism present in *Saramandaia* (*Saramandaia*, 1970/2013), which the São Paulo group claims to be a constituent element of the Dias Gomes style – with cartoonish characters, in addition to the magical and experimental elements.

Besides the aesthetics of the telenovelas from the 1980s and 1990s the production aspect also overcomes temporality in relation to recent telenovelas. Some productions such as *Lado a Lado* (*Side by Side*, 2013) were recently aired and thus did not have enough time to acquire the nostalgic appeal on which the groups were basing their arguments. Regarding these productions, Nayara (BH) stated that *Meu Pedacinho de Chão* (*My Little Piece of Ground*, 2014) is current and cult, which Carol justifies calling it again 'gourmetized aesthetics'. Thus, when talking about these productions, the groups related the cult status to to the artistic and aesthetic aspect of the narrative. In general, the groups believed that there is an intention in the production of the telenovela which makes it cult, whilst the consequent popularity does not interfere in this status. On the other hand, they also admit that cult status could be acquired by the temporal facet of a narrative which becomes 'unforgettable' after spontaneous engagement from the audience (and hence not controllable by producers).

In summary, it was possible to notice elements of familiar theories about cult that appear in the speeches of the Brazilian audience, such as the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, although sometimes criticized, and the idea of cult as a genre, associated with horror or fantasy narratives. But mainly, three different perceptions of cult were implicit and became evident in the conversation. The first was the relationship between cult and memory, which resulted in some productions standing out because they evoke nostalgia for a common cultural repertoire. The second perspective was related to the production, such as the technical aspects and artistic character, both in the aesthetic sense and in the political or philosophical content. Some participants contested, however, the cult character for

current productions, such as *Avenida Brasil*, which led me to think of it as a sort of exception, bringing up a third perspective: that of a contemporary cult, more linked to the conceptions of cult in relation to the audience and their affective involvement while it is on air. Thus, the discussion in the groups brought up evidence of three different perceptions of cult by the participants. These perceptions inspired me to examine the telenovelas over three axes: nostalgic cult, aesthetic cult and contemporary cult, as will be seen below.

Telenovelas and three types of cult

The top ten cult telenovelas were then discussed during two focus groups with the aim of discovering the reasons why those titles were considered cult. From these groups came a perception that was not that far from what theories suggest: the inclusion of some titles was justified because of their aesthetics, others because of their nostalgic value, and one of them for their viewer engagement during the time it was on air. The elected telenovelas were then organised into three axes: nostalgic cult, aesthetic cult, and contemporary cult, as follows.

These three meanings are presented below so that the notion of cult is not treated as homogenous, but internally diverse. The telenovelas were organized based on the main element that approximates them to the concept of cult, according to the opinion of the fans from the focus groups. These aspects are used solely with the intention of detailing and organizing data. They can, nevertheless, intermingle as any productions can have elements that bring them closer to more than one axis all at once.

Table 3 – Three aspects of cult

	Nostalgic cult	Aesthetic cult	Contemporary cult
1	Roque Santeiro		
2		Which King Am I?	
3			Brazil Avenue
4	Anything Goes		
5		Vamp	
6		Side by Side	
7		King of Cattle	
8		My Little Piece of Ground	
9	O Bem-Amado		
10		Saramandaia	

1. Nostalgic cult

According to Holdsworth (2011), television is the primary medium responsible for the construction of a nostalgic iconography, reinforcing a visual repertoire of a certain period or era, since nostalgia is associated with the home, the domestic, the place where the TV is placed. The notion of a nostalgic cult, therefore, links the production of a telenovela to its temporality, to an affection that lingers through time, to productions that are seen as 'unforgettable'. This means that a nostalgic cult is related more to an aspect of reception than production, which is a spontaneous reaction even though there might be elements in the plot that seek to leave a mark in memory.

This approach holds strongest in the case of the highest-raking *Roque Santeiro*, considered as cult by no fewer than 60 of my respondents. *Roque Santeiro* was aired in 1985 and criticised mysticism and religiosity with light humour. The plot was based on a theatrical play by Dias Gomes, who also wrote the TV script. The story portrayed a fictional town the trade and tourism of which survived because of a false saint, named 'Roque Santeiro' who supposedly died in a popular revolt. He then became a sort of hero, with sacred images, poetry books (cordel) and even a widow (without ever getting married). The trigger for the plot is the return of Roque, who was in fact alive, which causes a furore in the city. The construction of a false religious myth was remembered in the second focus group as a characteristic of popular national belief, with profound 'Brazilianness'. In addition, *Roque Santeiro* was significant because it was censored in 1975 by the military dictatorship after having been equally censored when it was first made into a play. This meant the original play and the telenovela had some significance as political art. Characters became staple figures in cultural references and some of its catchphrases are used to this day – it has, in other words, become a milestone in the country's TV writing. It was also the first telenovela to be edited and sold on DVD by Globo.

Anything Goes (Vale Tudo, 1988) was also a successful telenovela, especially as it represented the political disbelief of 1980s Brazil. The plot offered a political critique as well as a provocation in that it questioned to what point it was worth being honest in Brazil. The participants of the focus groups believed it was mentioned in the questionnaire for its political criticism which attached it to its 1980s context. These opinions reinforce the element of memory, enveloped in a nostalgic aura, common to the cult – both in the perception of theorists and among participants of both groups. Besides its social and political critique, one of its most memorable plot points was the mystery around 'Who killed Odete Roitman?', the leading villain who was killed by an (at first) unknown shooter. The murder scene was a hot topic for years, at a time when murder mysteries were not yet so common. When it was rerun in Brazil, the audience was ever more interested in the narrative, but, this time, the audience included young viewers who had not originally watched it but who had certainly already heard about the assassination of Odete Roitman. Because of the young viewers' familiarity with digital media, the telenovela became a

trending topic on social networks, with millions of comments and videos creating a new social arena around the production.



Figure 1. Characters from in *Roque Santeiro* and scene from *Anything Goes* Source: Memória Roberto Marinho and Canal Viva

Both titles, though briefly mentioned here, featured significant characters in the TV memory, with narratives that offered a social and political critique that turned out to be transtemporal and were followed, during their reruns, by viewers who were equally active online. This, therefore, also suggests the presence of cult elements relating to aesthetics and to fandom, bringing it closer to being a true Brazilian cult.

2. Aesthetic cult

This perception of cult refers to Eco's ideas (1985), as well as to that of other theorists, who define a cult in terms of its textual and production features: that is, as a result of characteristics that have been established since their conception. During the focus groups, participants also asserted that they considered as cult anything that was different from the ordinary or 'unconventional'. Image, framing, costumes, as well as the construction of the narrative or plot can result in innovation and bring some fresh air into the classic model of the melodrama. In this sense, the notion of an aesthetic cult encompasses especially those productions that stood out for their execution.

These productions could undoubtedly acquire a nostalgic, affective character over time. However, they often offer specific production characteristics which means that while they may sometimes attract low ratings, they receive overall positive reviews from the critics as a result of their production quality. One such example was *My Little Piece of Ground* (*Meu Pedacinho de Chão*, 2014). Without any specific temporality, the narrative was built as a fable. For the focus group participants, there was no doubt that it featured amongst the top ten titles in the survey because of its aesthetic elements. The groups believed that the cult aspect comes from its imagery, which was planned in the production of the telenovela and therefore differentiates it from other titles that seemed to be mentioned for the nostalgic aura they had acquired over the years.

The narrative was simple and told the story of a teacher who arrives in a small town, willing to re-open the school. The entire production was conceived in order to innovate, from technical and artistic structures to the ways in which it was produced. The set was built with 20 tonnes of tin, as well as other materials such as plastic and cloth. The result was a playful and inviting set that resembled Alice in Wonderland and which coloured TV screens for a few months.

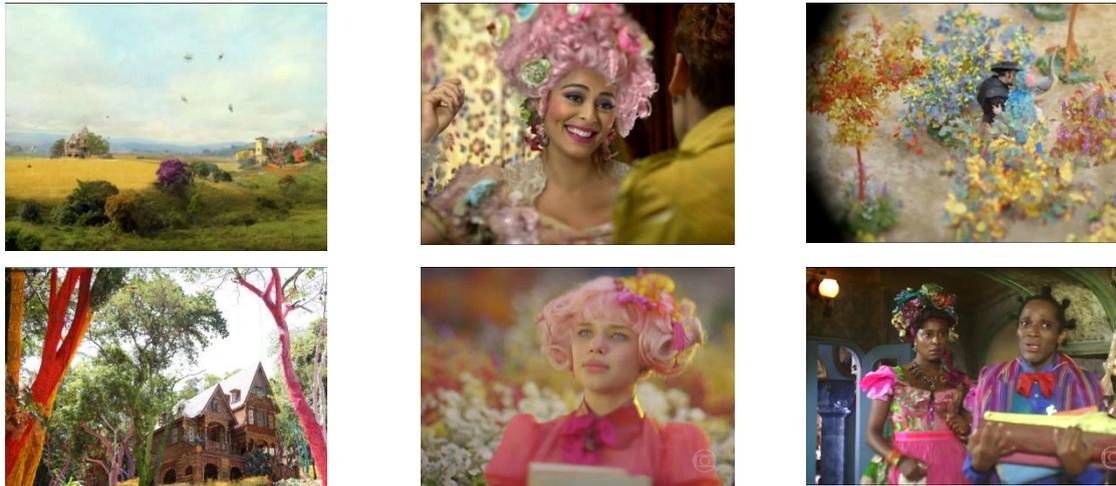


Figure 2. Scenes from *My Little Piece of Ground* (*Meu Pedacinho de Chão*) Source: Memória Globo / GShow

Costumes mixed nineteenth century silhouettes with contemporary materials such as plastic, rubber, LED fabric, pink and blue wigs, cloth horses, and knitted trees. The narrative also mixed scenes and animated characters with a soundtrack which was composed especially for the telenovela by conductor Tim Rescala with the Heliópolis Symphony Orchestra. These characteristics made *My Little Piece of Ground* into something that had never been seen before in a telenovela. Despite low ratings, TV critics praised the show for its technical production qualities and the survey respondents recognised it as cult.

The approximation to the idea of an aesthetic cult, however, is not linked to an excess of artistic quality. On the contrary, low-quality production might often be considered cult, as Pearson (2010) points out. Another example of a telenovela seen as cult was *Vamp* (Globo 1991-1992), which is closer to the notion of trash aesthetics than to something of high artistic value.

Vamp is one of the few Brazilian telenovelas featuring vampires, which brings it closer to Abbott's approach (2010), which associated the status of cult with specific genres, usually horror, fantasy narratives, or satire. The scenery was simple, special effects, unpretentious at best, and the vampires' teeth were visibly fake, which did not stop them from being commercialised. Despite being blood-thirsty, the telenovela was humorous and ended up not being scary at all, an example of which was the one-toothed character. In style and execution it resembled the B films, also known as trash horror, that are well established in the cult universe. In one of its memorable scenes, Vlad goes to the cemetery and invokes

his departed friends, who rise from their tombs as zombies and start to dance to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, copying the movels of David Bowie's *Jareth the Goblin King's* from *Labyrinth* (1986).

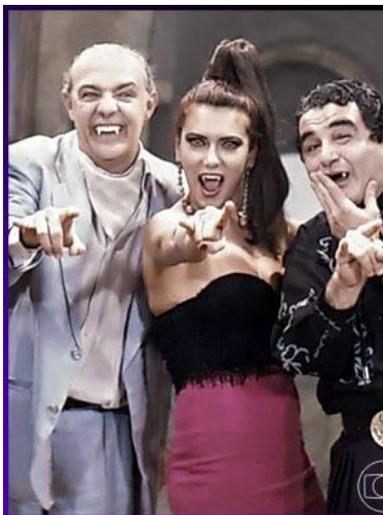


Figure 3. Characters from *Vamp* and the cemetery scene. Source: Memória Globo

The telenovela's soundtrack, a sticker album, as well as vampire teeth were sold, flooding children's and teenagers' homes in the early 1990s. Most focus group participants agreed that this telenovela deserved the title of cult. On top of its vampire-like genre and its trash aesthetics, it enjoyed massive audience engagement amongst its younger viewers in the early 1990s, which is why it triggers affective memories and nostalgic value, although it stands out for its artistic characteristics, just as in the first example, *My Little Piece of Ground*.

Regarding the other titles, the participants of both groups easily agreed that *Which King Am I?* (*Que Rei Sou Eu?*, 1989) was cult for combining the elements they consider important: temporality, since it was aired in the 1980s, innovative production especially regarding costumes, and political criticism. They think similarly when considering *Saramandaia* (1973/2016) and *O Bem-Amado* (1973), both written by Dias Gomes. The participants reinforce the significance of the magic realism, the cartoonish, comical and memorable characters as being constituents of the author's style. In this sense there is also a theoretical approach to cult TV that considers its authorship, such as when Lavery (2010) referred to David Lynch as 'the cultest of directors' (p. 2). For example, in *Saramandaia* two remarkable scenes are the explosion of a fat woman and the hunchback man who is discovered to have wings.



Figure 4 - Scene from *Saramandaia* (remake, 2016) Source: GShow

Saramandaia also has a nostalgic element that was brought up by the groups, However, they also considered that its eerie aspect is probably the main reason for its presence in the top ten telenovelas considered cult.



Figure 5 –Scenes from *Side by Side (Lado a Lado)* Source: GShow

Side by Side (Lado a Lado, 2012-2013) is a recent telenovela that was aired two years before the survey. This suggests, in a way, that the main criteria for it being considered cult TV by twelve people was its aesthetic qualities, since not enough time had elapsed for a nostalgic element. It also departs from the contemporary cult by not having obtained high ratings or strong audience engagement As a result it does not manifest the strong fan following that renders it a cult. Nevertheless, the telenovela won an International Emmy for best telenovela, which support the significance of the perceived quality of the production. Focus group participants also highlighted the plot as a significant feature, loaded as it was with historical references that included its representation of the period of slavery. It also included

elements of national culture, such as capoeira⁴, a Brazilian martial art disguised as a dance, which combines acrobatic moves and traditional music.

The analysis and debate with the telenovela fans highlighted the production quality and aesthetic elements of these six productions which differ from the three titles that were remembered for their nostalgic appeal. The fans considered that these productions deserved to be considered as cult because of their narrative and the quality of production (intentional cult) instead of their audience (spontaneous cult). Therefore, they were considered to belong to the category of the aesthetic cult.

3. Contemporary cult

The third and, for some, main characteristic of a cult production is the audience-turned-fan engagement. Fans have been shown to revere specific TV fiction and often create true communities of worship (reference here?). This aspect, associated with reception, addresses a common characteristic of telenovelas that reach a large and loyal audience.

The telenovela *Avenida Brasil* marked a milestone in fan engagement when it was originally broadcast. Even though it had original elements such as a peculiar type of camera movement and a dark set that composes a noir environment, members of the focus group did not comment on these. Nor was there time for a nostalgic aura to emerge (at least it had not up to the point when the surveys were conducted). What made it stand out for the focus group participants was the specificity of fan engagement during the months it was on air. For some viewers, it marked the emergence of a kind of immediate, or contemporary cult, in contrast to the other titles that were mentioned by respondents.

An astounding success with both critics and viewers alike, *Avenida Brasil* had complex characters, filled with both good and evil, and very far from the classic dualism between good and bad guys that is usually attributed to melodrama. The protagonism of a working class family was also considered quite original, since commonly rich families held this position. This resulted in widespread identification and commotion, which could be easily seen online.

Comment on social networks was far from uncommon: *Avenida Brasil* had around 200 trending topics on Twitter during the time that it was on air. There were countless memes, especially the 'frozen background' one, against which many celebrities, politicians, or ordinary folks were shown, and the catchphrase 'Serve me, bitch', used by the protagonist, Nina, as she had her revenge against Carminha, who had abandoned Nina in a landfill when she was a child.

⁴ Capoeira is a type of Brazilian martial art, although there is no practice with means of competition. Its origin comes from slaves who needed to train but had to disguise their fighting as a dance. Nowadays, it is considered a tradition, an art form and a physical and spiritual way of self-expression.



Figure 6 - Examples of memes (frozen background and 'Serve me, bitch') Source: Facebook

During its two final months, such manifestations increased, and the final episode brought Brazil to a standstill as a true media event in that it disrupted everyday routines, evidenced the ritualistic characteristics of viewing, and played a role in unifying society (Couldry, Hepp and Krotz 2010, 8). Moreover, the audience's alertness featured in both national and international media. The commotion stirred by the final episode made the headlines, especially because then-president Dilma Rousseff cancelled her appearance at the rally of Fernando Haddad, who was running to be the mayor of São Paulo at the time, for fear that the rally would lose out to the telenovela. There were also anxieties about the possible impact on the country's electrical grid, which was reinforced to guarantee that there would be no power outages during the final episode. In fact there were no outages, but everyone online was talking about how empty the streets were and how many pubs set up screenings so that the final episode could be watched collectively – something not common at all for telenovelas. The next day, the event made international news too, being mentioned by The Guardian, Le Figaro, and BBC Latin American & Caribbean, to name but a few.

This colossal affection, audience engagement and the admiration of the critics clearly highlight the difference between *Avenida Brasil's* audience and other recent Brazilian telenovelas. The cult effect was intense and the very act of watching TV and commenting on social networks was heightened. The show undoubtedly contributed towards a national symbolic unity, ultimately becoming an icon of Brazilian TV – or, in sum, a cult.

Final remarks

Despite the complexity of the discussions around the concept of cult, certain theoretical guidelines inform these discussions and, as is the case with most concepts in the field of communications, they are not static. The notion of cult TV as opposed to popular TV has already been scrutinised, allowing the term to be associated with any popular programme. In Brazil, the cultural products that are perceived to be cult are telenovelas.

Once the characteristics of cult TV described by Pearson (2010), Le Guern (2004), and Eco (1985) are revisited, approximations emerge between the concept of cult TV and Brazilian telenovelas. The theoretical premises are corroborated through telenovelas that are considered cult by respondents to the survey and participants of the focus groups mentioned in this article themselves. Such perceptions open up space for a dialogue between the many international discussions of cult TV and those arising in a national context.

My intention here has been to contribute to, and expand, the discussion of cult TV by including the vernacular understanding of a specific national audience, represented here by the telenovela fans. Although they are not exactly cult followers in the more traditional sense, these fans have an affective connection to telenovelas that is very much tied to their sense of who they are. The participants in this study thus reveal how they perceive the telenovelas to constitute a form of cult TV as this is understood within the culture of Brazil. In this way, this article demonstrates how the concept of cult TV may differ in a specific national context and hopes to provoke further discussion.

Biographical Note

Clarice Greco is a Professor at the Postgraduate Programme in Communications at Paulista University (UNIP). She concluded postdoctoral research at the School of Communications and Arts at the University of São Paulo (ECA-USP), having received a PhD and an MA from the same institution. Coordinator of the Research Group of Analysis of Audiovisual Products (GRUPA). Current research subjects include Television studies, Pop culture and Fan studies. Email: claricegreco@gmail.com

References

- Abbott, Stacey. 2010. *The Cult TV Book: from Start Trek to Dexter, new approaches to TV outside the box*. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: reflexions on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bachelard, Gaston. 1972. *Conhecimento Comum e Conhecimento Científico*. *Tempo Brasileiro*. São Paulo, n. 28, p. 47-56, jan-mar 1972.
- Carey, John. 1992. A Cultural Approach of Communication. In: *Communication as Culture. Essays on Media and Society*. [1975]. London: Routledge. p. 13-36.
- Couldry, Nick and Hepp, Andreas and Krotz, Friedrich. 2010. *Media Events in a Global Age*. New York: Routledge.

- Durkheim, Émile. 2000. *As Formas Elementares da Vida Religiosa – O Sistema Totêmico na Austrália*. [1912]. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- Eco, Umberto. 1985. 'Casablanca': Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage. *SubStance*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Issue 47: In Search of Eco's Roses. p. 3-12.
- Gondim, Sônia Maria Guedes. 2003. Grupos Focais como Técnica de Investigação Qualitativa: desafios metodológicos. *Revista Paidéia*. 12(24). pp 149-161
- Greco, Clarice. 2013. *Qualidade na TV: telenovela, crítica e público*. São Paulo: Atlas.
- Gwenllian-Jones, Sara.; Pearson, Roberta. (2004). 'Introduction'. In *Cult Television*, edited by Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hills, Matt. 2015. Fandom as na object and the objects of fandom. Interview by Clarice Greco. *MATRIZES*. V. 9, n. 1.
- Hills, Matt. 2010. 'Mainstream Cult'. In *The Cult TV Book: from Star Trek to Dexter, new approaches to TV outside the box*, edited by Stacey Abbot. New York: Soft Skull Press.
- Hills, Matt. 2002. *Fan Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Jancovich, Mark and Hunt, Nathan. 2004. The Mainstream, Distinction and Cult TV. In *Cult Television*, edited by Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lavery, David, ed. 2010. *The Essential Cult TV Reader*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Le Guern, Philippe. 2004. Toward a Constructivist Approach to Media Cults. In *Cult Television*, edited by Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lopes, Maria Immacolata Vassallo. 2004. *Telenovela: Internacionalização e Interculturalidade*. São Paulo, Loyola.
- Lopes, Maria Immacolata Vassallo. 2003. A Telenovela Brasileira: uma Narrativa Sobre a Nação. *Comunicação & Educação*, v.26. São Paulo, jan/apr.
- LOPES, Maria Immacolata Vassallo. 2010. Reflexividade e Relacionismo como Questões Epistemológicas na Pesquisa Empírica em Comunicação. In: BRAGA, José Luiz; LOPES, Maria Immacolata Vassallo de; MARTINO, Luiz Claudio (orgs.). *Pesquisa Empírica em Comunicação*. São Paulo: Paulus. Pp 27-49.
- Lopes, Maria Immacolata Vassallo. 2005. *Pesquisa em Comunicação*. São Paulo, Loyola. 8. ed., 2005.
- Martins, José de Souza. 1998. O senso comum e a vida cotidiana. *Tempo Social; Revista de Sociologia*. USP, São Paulo, 10 (1): 1-8.

- Mathijs, Ernest and Mendik, Xavier. 2008. The concept of Cult. In *The Cult Film Reader*, edited by Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik. New York: Open University Press.
- Pearson, Roberta. 2010. Observations on Cult Television. In *The Cult TV book: from Star Trek to Dexter*, new approaches to TV outside the box, edited by Stacey Abbot. New York: Soft Skull Press.
- Reis, Felipe. 2012. O Uso da Categoria de Ritual nos Estudos de Comunicação: uma análise das intersecções entre antropologia e teoria da comunicação. *Observatorio (OBS*) Journal*, vol.6 - nº2 (2012), 201-221.
- Sandvoss, Cornel. 2013. Quando Estrutura e Agência se Encontram: os fãs e o poder. *Ciberlegenda*, n. 28. 1.
- Santos, Boaventura Sousa. 2010. Da Colonialidade à Descolonialidade. In *Epistemologias do Sul*, organized by Boaventura de Sousa Santos e Maria Paula Meneses. São. Paulo; Editora Cortez. p. 637.
- Silverstone, Roger. 1994. *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.
- White, Robert. 1994. Televisão como Mito e Ritual. *Comunicação & Educação*. São Paulo, [1]: 47 a 55, sep.
- Williams, Rebecca. 2013. *Torchwood Declassified - Investigating Mainstream*. *Cult Television*. London: I.B Tauris.
- Wilcox, Rhonda V. 2010. The Aesthetics of Cult Television. In *The Cult TV Book: from Star Trek to Dexter*, New Approaches to TV Outside the Box, edited by Stacey Abbott. New York: Soft Skull Press.