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Author : Isabel Ferin CUNHA

Institutional affiliation : Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra

Country : Portugal

Email addresses: barone.ferin@gmail.com

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Studies on the reception of *telenovelas*¹ in Portugal: authors, methodologies and international influences

Reception studies in Portugal started in the eighties and must be analyzed in the media and academic Portuguese context. In the end of this decade new legislation was adopted in order to deregulate the market.² In 1992/93, after public concourse and approval of new legislation, emerged two private channels: SIC (Sociedade Independente de Comunicação) and TVI (Televisão da Igreja, then Televisão Independente) which will join the public broadcasters RTP1 and RTP2.

In view of the field of Communication we note that the explosion of courses in Communication Sciences, Journalism and Advertising will take place only in the nineties.³ In the previous decade, and since 1979, only existed in the Universidade Nova de Lisboa a graduation in Social Communication at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. This degree had reasonable disciplinary components in Philosophy, Literary Studies and Linguistics, which did not provide an conducive environment to the reception studies development. The undergraduate studies in Sociology and Anglo-American allowed in this context, greater awareness and contact with reception studies.

Our paper aims to survey the studies of reception on television, with particular emphasis on *telenovelas* reception and its effects in the Portuguese society. The two pioneering studies were conducted in the late eighties and early nineties and sought to understand how the *telenovela* contents are appropriate in everyday life. Other reception studies were performed in the nineties and by then in the first decade of the millennium, either about the Brazilian and Portuguese *telenovelas* reception. We emphasize that by 1999, the ratings give absolute hegemony to Brazilian *telenovelas* and only from the beginning of the millennium those are outweighed by the Portuguese ones.

¹ Telenovela is a fictional product that tells a story in about 170 episodes. The plot has many nuclei and the story has beginning, middle and end as opposed to soap operas. It is a product with origin in Latin America developed mainly by Globo TV in Brazil.

² Cfr: Lei de Bases de 88/89

³ Couto, A. I. (2007) *Das barreiras alfandegárias entre campos disciplinares: breve ilustração a partir do caso sociologia e ciências da comunicação*, CIES e-WORKING PAPERS, nº 36.

The two pioneering studies were focused on Brazilian *telenovelas* and feature different methodological approaches.

The first study dates from 1987 and aims to catch the *ideological* effects (Viegas, 1987: 21-22) of *telenovelas* in Portuguese public. The author notes that the criticisms can be systematized in three fundamental aspects: the dangerous hegemony of the “Brazilian speaking” and “Brazilianisms” in Portuguese culture; the presentation of new behaviors and new moral standards (which undermine traditional morality and the Catholic Church authority); the critical stance of the elites (especially intellectuals) in relation to this genre of fiction. For this purpose he conducted 18 in-depth interviews — and he subsequently selected five (two men and three women) with differentiated ages and socio-professional strata — looking to identify the values (positive or negative) of adhesion expressed by the interviewees.⁴ The author, professor and researcher at the Instituto Superior da Empresa e do Trabalho (ISCTE), identifies three key points in the conclusions. First, he believes there is a distinction between *telenovela’s* and audiences’ speeches: the prominence that is given to the themes and characters in *telenovelas* do not coincide with that which is given by the audience. Secondly, the author concludes that there is a relationship between the respondent’s interpretations, the *telenovelas* discourses ideologies and the structural conditions of their existence. Finally, in a perspective of assessing the impacts of Brazilian *telenovelas* in the Portuguese public, notes that the *telenovela* show *news behaviors and value systems, including live images from the high middle class* and a set of values of *modernity*, such as consumption and success (Viegas, 1987).

In 1994, it is published a second study of reception based on a ethnographic methodology inspired by Hobson (1982), Ang (1985) Leal (1986), Fisk (1987) and Morley (1992) studies. The author, João Paulo Moreira, professor at the Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Coimbra, had already developed an earlier work on *telenovelas*,⁵ and in this new article he *aims to identify who watch telenovelas, but also how people do this, their attitudes and the meanings that they give to contents* (Moreira, 1994:66). Moreira says that there aren’t studies on *telenovelas* and their audiences and reception in Portugal. He is astonished by this, because it is a fictional program that for over two decades was broadcasting every day very successful. However, *despite the size of the phenomenon did not attract a proportionate interest in the scientific community* (Moreira, 1994: 60). He also notes that the phenomenon of Brazilian *telenovelas* in Portugal should become a subject of critical research for multiple and discontinuous reasons such as: differences in ways of speaking Portuguese; political and cultural context; different times and

⁴ The *telenovela* that was broadcast at the time of this study is *Father Hero*, written and produced in Brazil in 1979, by Janet Clair, Direction of Walter Avancini, Gonzaga and Roberto Talma Blota.

⁵ Cfr: Moreira, J.P. (1980) “Telenovela: A Propósito da Cultura de Massas”, Coimbra, *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 4-5: 47-85; Moreira, J.P. (1991) “Telenovela: Um Desfile de Modelos” Coimbra, *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 33: 253-263;

showtimes; lag scenes and rhythms of daily life like meals, food, household and rhythms of life. The author developed an empirical study based on group interviews (focus group) in two different areas of the city of Coimbra, namely in a small village on the outskirts and in a popular neighborhood. He promoted five sessions conducted with 20 individuals, 10 men and 10 women, mostly employed in unskilled or semiskilled service, which lasted about 90 minutes.

The conclusions of this study highlighted the topics included in the plots of the *telenovelas*, particularly those which are identified as belonging to the *public space* (social rights and duties, political corruption, the role of gender, national identity) as opposed to the *private sphere* (emotions, feelings, etc.). The respondents compare (in 1994) the Brazilian and Portuguese *telenovelas*, giving the former greater credibility and ability to *portray the realities of simple people and working life, as well as the struggles against social inequalities*. Another set of important observations advanced in this study described the segmentation of public tastes and gender issues. Younger audiences preferred plots that emphasize the urban lifestyles and humor, while the older showed a preference for historical reconstructions and rural environments. The study noted — from a gender perspective — that women (as advanced by Hobson and Ang) followed the *telenovelas* to the rhythm of their domestic activities, while men seem just watch, when they were unoccupied during prime-time *telenovela*.

From this period until the start of the new millennium, there aren't studies on *telenovelas*'s reception but only texts that attempt to reconstruct the reception basing on the analysis of the press, television critics, columnists of the press, as well as in articles published in television magazines.

An essay published in 1995⁶, during the 'audiences war' around *telenovelas* between public and private TV channels, the authors mobilize arguments based on Portuguese and Brazilian journalists (eg, Duda Guennes, Artur da Tavola, Vicente Jorge Silva), Brazilian authors (eg Dulcilia Buitonni, Muniz Sodre, Samira Yusef and Nancy Cardia), Latin American writers (eg, Vargas Llosa and José Ignacio Cabrujas) and Portuguese Professors and intellectuals (Adriano Duarte Rodrigues, Natália Correia, Eduardo Prado Coelho, Esteves Cardoso) to discuss the impacts caused by the spectators continued viewing of Brazilian *telenovelas*. The essay argues that the four hours of television consumed by the Portuguese daily are due to the Brazilian *telenovelas* and, based on surveys and performed at the time, attributed difficulties to the Portuguese in distinguishing between real and imaginary world. In the rural hinterland of the country, according to many critics cited by the authors, the Brazilian *telenovelas* showed social and moral behaviors, as well as lifestyles completely unimagined by the people. For the first time in its history in Portugal, the Catholic Church felt confronted every day by an emitter

⁶ Cfr: Albuquerque, D. e Vieira, A. (1995) "As Telenovelas em Portugal - história e teoria do género" in *O Fenómeno Televisivo*, Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores.

almighty. According to Albuquerque and Vieira (1995) despite being proven the damages caused by prolonged and continuous exposure to this fiction product, some intellectuals and critics appreciate it and not resist to its allure as evidenced by the quote from Eduardo Prado Coelho:⁷ *There is a pleasure to watch telenovelas that would be dishonest to conceal [...]. The telenovela is something else - a little oasis in the lives of all us [...] all the critical media analysis that intellectuals have done, just now, is based on this real aberration which is the concealment of pleasure [...]*⁸

The following empirical reception studies on *telenovelas* emphasize different topics and methodologies. Some have focused on the family (eg, Silva, 2006, Silva, 2007, Castilho, 2010), others on gender issues, love and sexuality (eg, Policarpo, 2006, Silva, 2006, Alvares, 2008), but also on age consumptions (Burnay, 2004, Cardoso e Amaral, 2006, Valdigem, 2006) migration and ethnic aspects (Cunha, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010, Valdigem, 2005). Some studies are mainly interested in identifying processes of appropriation relating to lifestyle and other components in culture and identity. Almost all the empirical work opts for mixed ethnographic methods, which include participant observation, surveys, semi-directed or in-depth interviews, as well as focus group sessions. The studies may be located in small villages (Vila Pouca do Campo, Anadia near Coimbra) in urban centers (Cascais, Carnaxide, Lisbon) or in the slums of Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, located in the municipalities of Amadora, Loures and Odivelas). Some of these studies present a comparative perspective between Portugal and Brazil in order to identify differences and similarities of the reception on Media, Digital Media and telenovelas among the two countries.

Theoretically these studies are based on Cultural Studies, either Anglo-Saxon or Latin-American. Among the first studies we stress the inspiration of the founding work of Richard Hoggart and the studies of Ang, Hobson, Morley, Moors, Stuart Hall and Silverstone. The Latin America theoretical influence is present since the early Portuguese studies on *telenovelas*, either on production side or on the reception one. We underline the predominance of the Center for Research of Telenovela (Centro de Pesquisa da Telenovela) at the Escola de Comunicações e Artes, University of São Paulo, Brazil (authors like Baccega, Ballog, Costa, Escosteguy, Fadul, Jacks, Lopes and Pallotini). The Latin American reference is present since the early nineties, through the Brazilian researchers and was primarily based on three authors, Jesus Martín-Barbero (Spanish settled in Bolivia), Nora Mazzioti (Argentina) and Guillermo Orozco Gomez (Mexico). At the intersection of these schools and authors we can also recognize the contributions of Milly Buonanno (Italy), Lorenzo Vilches and Charo Lacalle (Spain).

⁷ Eduardo Prado Coelho (1944-2007) has been a professor and intellectual. He was columnist for several newspapers.

⁸ Cfr: Coelho, E.P. (1986) "E no calor dessa magia", Lisboa, *Semanário Expresso*, 22/11