

Social uses of soap operas by Cuban families of different socio-economics positions

Usos sociales de la telenovela por familias cubanas de diferentes posiciones socioeconómicas

BEATRIZ DRAKE TAPIA, Instituto Cubano de Investigación Cultural "Juan Marinello", La Habana, Cuba
[beatriz@icic.cult.cu]

YILIAN MACHADO PÉREZ, Facultad de Comunicación de la Universidad de La Habana, La Habana, Cuba
[yilianmachado@fcom.uh.cu]

ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis of the social uses of a Brazilian soap opera in three Cuban families—specifically from Havana— from different socioeconomic positions (high, medium, and low). It relies on a qualitative perspective and ethnographic approaches. It also uses techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, completion of sentences, and group discussion. In doing so, the study addresses the processes of appropriation and allocation of meanings around the soap opera. In all three families, melodrama rises as a space for entertainment, a way of escaping reality, and communicative interactions. The main differences arise from factors associated with the location of families in the broader context that contains them, as well as subjective processes that generate unique strategies and meanings by different family members.

Keywords: social uses, soap opera, family, appropriation, Cuba.

RESUMEN

Este estudio constituye un análisis de los usos sociales de la telenovela brasileña por parte de tres familias cubanas, residentes en La Habana, de diferentes posiciones socioeconómicas (alta, media y baja). Descansa en la perspectiva cualitativa y en el método etnográfico de investigación. Utiliza técnicas tales como la observación participante, la entrevista en profundidad, el completamiento de frases y el grupo de discusión. Da cuenta de los procesos de apropiación y asignación de sentidos en torno a la telenovela. En las tres familias, el melodrama se erige como espacio promotor de entretenimiento, escape de la realidad y de interacciones comunicativas. Las principales diferencias se derivan de factores asociados a la ubicación de las familias en el contexto más amplio que las contiene, así como de los procesos subjetivos que generan estrategias y significaciones singulares por parte de los miembros.

Palabras clave: usos sociales, telenovela, familia, apropiación, Cuba.

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INTRODUCTION

The Second National Survey on Practices of Cultural Consumption in Cuba carried out by the Cuban Institute of Cultural Research Juan Marinello¹, during the years 2008 and 2009, showed that watching television is one of the more stable cultural behaviors of the population. In this sense, it was found that the soap opera is one of the genres that occupy the first places in the structure of preferences of the audience (Linares, Mora, Rivero & Mendoza, 2010).

In particular, the fictional dramatic genre produced in Brazil has a strong reception in the audience, which already has a rich tradition and cultural experience associated with the consumption of these products. These dramas—which are part of a stable programming proposal—are filters through which the subjects examine, critical and appraisingly, the remaining productions.

Despite the differences that mark the individual and group positions from which the soap operas are seen, there is no doubt of their social and cultural importance in the everyday life of families. This reveals the relevance of the subject as object of research, as complex and legitimate as any other scientific project.

This study focused on knowing the social uses of Brazilian telenovela by Cuban families from different socioeconomic positions, residents in Havana. To this end, it was crucial to inquire about the motivations and satisfactions of the subjects around those soap operas, to explain the processes of appropriation, to expose the mediator factors (socio-economic and individual-group) of social uses and to identify the types of social uses that come into play.

We selected three families, representatives of the high, medium and low socio-economic positions (PSA, PSM and PSB). The criteria for this classification emanated from the research results obtained by the Center for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS, by its Spanish acronym), affiliated to the Academy of Sciences of Cuba. These include the place of residence, living conditions, the physical characteristics of the household, equipment property, the enjoyment of certain products and services, family incomes and the profession, trade or occupation of the subjects.

The family represents a privileged space where processes of appropriations and re-appropriations of television meanings occur. This paper gives an account of that “astute, dispersed, silent and hidden production,

but insinuated everywhere” (De Certeau, 1986, p. 61) inserted in the social uses given to the Brazilian soap opera by family groups, as these constitute the individual’s primary community of interpretation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

USES: NETWORK OF INTERACTIONS

The issue of uses has been historically linked to the assumptions of the hypothesis of uses and gratifications. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1985, pp. 135-142) synthesize the postulates of these studies as follows:

- a) The audience is conceived as an active group. The use of media by individuals is supposed to be aimed at specific objectives.
- b) The member of the audience has much of the initiative of linking the gratification of the need and the choice of media.
- c) The media compete with other sources of satisfaction of needs, so that the needs addressed by mass media are only part of multiple human needs.
- d) The persons are sufficiently aware to be able to report on their interests and motivations to make use of the media.
- e) The judgments about the cultural significance of mass media should be suspended, while the audience guidelines are explored.

The main limitations to the model of uses and gratifications have to do with its approach, too individualistic, that omits the social conditions in which the needs of the subjects produce. Even though these studies recognized the active nature of receivers, it prevailed in them a linear and transmissive conception of the communication process, trying to reconcile the effects of media with the needs of the subjects. However, as stated by Rubin (1996), although these investigations have received their dose of criticism, “they largely reflect the state of things at the beginning of the 1970s and are specifically directed to initial research budgets” (p. 562).

In order to analyze the logic of the uses, Martín-Barbero (1987a) proposes a displacement with respect to these foundations, since the aim is to “extract the study of reception of the space bounded by a communication thought in terms of messages that circulate, of effects and reactions, to relocate it in the field of culture” (p. 240). According to Orozco (1998), the fundamental

significance of this shift lies in considering that the uses of communication are not individual, but social; thus, he says, “the investigative emphasis is put off-center of the direct interpellation of a media to its audience, to relocate to the convergence (of mediation and practice) involved in the use” (p. 96).

To understand the interrelations between the concepts of consumption and social uses, it is necessary to revisit the work of the devoted French researcher Michel de Certeau. His work, of vast international repercussions in the field of cultural studies, contains broad reflections on everyday life, consumption and media-cultural uses.

According to De Certeau (2000), the inquiry about the uses must consider the own ambiguity of the term. Although the word “uses” is associated with customs, stereotyped procedures or ways of doing, when speaking of uses there is a reference to the recognition of actions with formality and creativity that are organized and located in that production inherent to the consumption.

The logic of this analysis lies, therefore, in examining what the “cultural consumer fabricates during the hours spent watching TV or a movie in the cinema and with the images that are offered completely made” (De Certeau, 1986, p. 61). The concept of production by the consumer is shared by Bourdieu (2002), who proposes that “the consumption of goods certainly is always, in varying degrees according to the goods and the consumers, a work appropriation; or, more accurately, that the consumer contributes to produce product that it consumes” (cit. by Gonzalez and Aguilera, 2007, p. 30).

To this consumer, which De Certeau prefers to call “practicing”, belongs a production that remains hidden. This happens because “to the production of objects and images, rationalized, centralized, loud, spectacular, expansionist production, corresponds another production hidden by the consumption, an astute, disperse, silent and hidden production, but insinuated everywhere” (De Certeau, 1986, p. 61). It is then that production which, though silent and dispersed, gives an account of the active character of subjects and the creativity that is always present in consumption. And although the creative activity of “practicing” is recognized, according to Guillermo Sunkel (2002), this notion of invisible production moves away from the danger of overestimating the consumer’s freedom. What is sought is the understanding that such practices are located in a hegemonic system, and give

account of the appropriation and resignification of the dominant order by the popular sectors.

To summarize the interrelations between the reception, consumption and use, it is useful to return to Ortega (2008) and its understanding that the consumption of cultural goods is “the set of socio-cultural processes in which the appropriation, reception and uses of the goods produced in the field of cultural production is performed” (p. 20). According to this line, “consumption implies use, wear, acquisition, enjoyment, reception of the meaning of ‘something’ (...). Hence, consumption can be not only appropriation, but also reception and use” (Ortega, 2008, p. 19). Thus, the references to use imply reception, and this implies consumption (Cantú, 1997). Following Cantú, it is important to clarify that when we talk about consumption, reception and uses, playing with the broadness of the concepts, we do not think in terms of stages or moments, but of implications and relationships according to the meaning adopted for terms. Although consumption has been understood as the “space” in which the appropriation and uses have place (García Canclini, 1991), the issue of social uses realizes the processes of appropriation and recognition taking place in consumption and in reception.

The “social uses” category allows inquiring into that function that the soap opera has, described by Martín-Barbero (1987b) as “the trade of mediation between the logic of the productive system and the logic of consumption, between the logic of format and the one of modes of reading, those of uses” (p. 6). We then decided on the frameworks of understanding that offers the category “social uses”, because as Orozco says (1998):

The proposal of social uses implies and reaffirms the link between social sectors participating in a same production mediated of senses and meanings in its communication processes. At the same time, the uses anchor an ‘analytical category’ that has become fundamental to understand the communicative production as uses converge mediations and practices (p. 96).

SOCIAL USES, SOAP OPERA AND FAMILY

Lull (1980) develops a typology of social uses of television in the family, pointing out the existence of two primary groups: structural uses and relational uses. The first has an ambient and a regulator dimension. From the ambient point of view, the television creates a set of sounds and images that make up an atmosphere

of support and family entertainment. He states that the simple condition of “powering” the TV means that users participate in a never-ending verbal communication. In addition, television has the structural characteristic of being a behavior regulator. In this sense, it affects and organizes time and family routine. This impacts beyond the family level, insofar as it also affects the distraction out of the house. Conversation patterns are also influenced by television routines. The second group includes the ways in which the audience creates “practical social agreements” involving television. The author acknowledges that the exclusivity of the categories proposed in the classification is not absolute, and with its sequential order (facilitation of communication, affiliation/evasion, social learning and capacity/dominion) tries to show the relative complexity of constructions.

By systematizing various results of ethnographic research, Valerio Fuenzalida (2005) concludes that television reception is integrated with the space-time of the everyday family life, in a way that “the ethnography of the reception at home reveals an everyday, noisy, and chatted reception” (p. 50). Other aspects warned by the author have to do with the ways in which television reception is adjusted to the different rhythms of the members of the house and is linked with activities, emotions and moods. The ludic aspect—also designated by Fuenzalida—is closely linked to the possibility than facing the screen the audience explores its everyday life, makes comparisons, fantasizes with what is different and inquires on its identity. In this sense, he points to that home is a cultural space-time with peculiar characteristics, involving the generation of special expectations when watching television, which he calls “situational expectations”.

These situational expectations when watching television should be research material within the home; they are often not even verbalized by the subjects, or they are confusingly expressed by members of the household (...). They are, thus, object of search, discernment, and constructivist interpretation. (Fuenzalida, 2002, p. 67)

In the framework of the social uses and television is the relationship family, soap opera, uses. The soap opera, as no other television genre, facilitates the interaction and family contact (Alonso, 1999). The viewing time “generally becomes into a physical-spatial coexistence between members of the home,

and motive for the interaction and communication on a matter or common story; something that may not occur frequently before the temporary urgency of everyday life” (Marquez, 2006, p. 37).

The use of the category “social uses” allows pointing out that:

The soap opera as a cultural experience in its audiences is lived as a fragmented universe that is in the memory of the families, precedes the emission, accompanies it in constant dialogue and simultaneous comparisons and does not go away with the end of the chapter, but survives it in multiple texts, objects, references, and speeches after it. (González, 1991, p. 222)

Considering the particularity of the melodramatic genre of transcending the same text to be located in several spatial and relational contexts, Martín-Barbero (1987b) highlighted the importance of the spaces of circulation and resignification. From the operational point of view, what this dimension seeks to investigate is:

Which spaces and what actors intervene in the circulation and resignification of soap operas, around which dimensions does the attention and interest revolves around, in what concerns it anchors, around which activities or main behaviors lies its weight, what characters catalyze desires/phobias. (p. 9)

This allows access, in short, to that survival of soap operas in the daily life of subjects.

According to González (1991), in the approach to families and the different cultural situations involving their relations with soap operas, the description of places, postures, interactions, as well as the discursive chains around the television genre become relevant. In processes of appropriation of the soap opera, the subjects consistently perform the exercise of comparison, in accordance with the location of the family in the social space and its experience of other cultural texts.

Returning to Martín-Barbero (1992), the study of soap opera requires de-centering the look, because if the “ways of seeing” located in the production spaces are formed by occupational cultures, professional ideologies and productive routines, those other ways that live in the practices listed in the consumption habits of class, cultural competencies and imaginaries of gender and age are conformed. For that reason, soap opera also becomes a matter of mediations.

The studies on reception and appropriation of the soap opera reveal that the socio-economic position or social class (seen as occupation, income or socioeconomic level, etc) is one of the major mediations that structures and conditions the reconstruction of the soap opera text by the receiver. Other mediating instances are gender (sex), age, occupation, education level, nationality, ethnicity and communicative competences (Alonso, 1999).

UNDER THE LATIN AMERICAN LENS...

Enrolled in the investigative trend that recognizes the role of social subjects in the cultural and communicative processes, the research that has been done in Latin America on soap operas has granted a special interest to social uses as a meaningful category for the understanding of the social function of the television melodrama in our countries. "The focus here is to discover what makes people with the soap opera, what are the forms of relationship with it, their modes of reading and exposure to the text, its own selective criteria of exposure" (González, 1998, p. 258).

Even when it is non-ascribed to the category of "social uses", several studies about the soap opera realize modes of appropriation, uses and social functions of the television genre. Some authors, such as Vilches (1997), defend the sentimental appropriation, because "the function of these series is to create the opportunity to listen to the emotions recreating arguments through the myths of always" (cit. by Gámez, 2001, p. 37).

Its role in the (re)definition of the female identity and subjectivity has been dealt with in various feminist studies. Even more daring are the investigations that value the influence of the soap opera in the collective imagination and its contributions to the national and Latin American identity. So, says Martín-Barbero (1987a), that "the melodrama works in these lands a deep vein of our collective imagination" (p. 243). Other authors are afraid to promote recognition of the soap opera as a catalyst for social change. They argue in this regard that the themes and events of their narrations often become question of issues such as the roles of gender, femininity and masculinity, the distribution of wealth, among others (Márquez, 2006).

No less important are the approaches to the educational appropriation of soap operas. The issue has been reflected by the prominent researcher Valerio Fuenzalida (1996), who says that "the educational resignification is extracted by the receiver, as if it were

a by-product, from the inside of a genre and a text of entertainment" (p. 10). In this sense, he adds that "this process of appropriation distorts the fantasies about the omnipotence of the broadcaster to impose their meanings to an allegedly passive audience" (p. 11).

According to Guillermo Orozco (2001), research that analyzes the social uses of programme genres such as the soap opera by various audience segments, is inserted into studies of media reception in Latin America that privilege the qualitative approach in the approach to their analysis objects. On the variety of research techniques that can apply in such studies, he points out:

Understanding by such not only the ethnographies of the reception, but a combination of different methodological tools ranging from the semi-directed interviews, discussion groups and participant observation, until life histories, psychodrama, projective techniques, and semiotic analysis of appropriations and narratives that make and formulate the receivers subjects from their interaction with specific media referents. (p. 7)

Ethnographic studies in Colima (Mexico) in middle class families conducted by Jorge González and other specialists are also in the framework of analysis on the social uses of television melodrama. With these approaches, the researchers sought to answer the question regarding what makes the family with the stories that the melodramatic genre offers. The category "social uses", in the words of Covarrubias, is understood here as the employment that the family members give to television as object of a manageable technology and as use of the contents apprehended and used in everyday life (quoted by González, 1998).

In the context of these investigations and following Rosa María Alfaro (1988), Karla Covarrubias (quoted by González, 1998) suggests five ways to use the soap operas contents In the family: a) the educational role, emerged from the comparison of what is seen with lived experiences; b) its preventive function, due to the distinction by the viewers of those situations that it does not agree with; c) the cultural representation, derived from the valuation of actions and cultural situations; d) the cognitive-social guidance and the consequential self-representations of class; and e) the catharsis, as ludic and sentimental relaxation and rupture of authoritarianisms and family repressions.

Many Latin American authors have been interested in the impact of soap operas in the family and social

interactions (for example, Alfaro, 1988; González, 1991; Martín-Barbero, 1992; Uribe, 1993; Covarrubias, 1998; Padilla, 2008). In particular, the interest for the category 'social uses' in Latin American studies on the consumption of soap operas is largely due to the fact that the uses of the genre are linked with the formation of identities, new forms of negotiation, participation, reception, and significance of the hegemony from the popular (Alfaro, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

The overall objective of this research was to understand and analyze the social uses of the Brazilian soap opera by Cuban families from different socioeconomic positions, residents in Havana. In this regard, it was crucial to consider, by way of specific objectives, the following: inquire about the motivations and satisfactions of the subjects around those soap operas, explain their processes of appropriation, expose the mediator factors (socio-economic and individual-group) of social uses and identify the types of social uses that come into play.

For the attainment of the objectives, the work rested on a qualitative research perspective, because this is interested, in particular, "by the way in which the world is understood, experienced, produced; by the context and processes; by the perspective of the participants, by their senses, by their meanings, their experience, their knowledge, their stories" (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2007, p. 29). The case study was the strategy used to analyze the social uses of the three families, each of which constituted a single case at the same time.

The selection of families was done intentionally, considering their socioeconomic positions, as well as other aspects of interest. For example, the recognition of the subjects as receivers of soap operas, especially Brazilians; the usual viewing of the product aired in primetime; the diversity in terms of level of education, generations, etc.

The research was developed in the light of the ethnographic method. The spinal axis of ethnography is the indispensable presence of the researcher in the field. In our case, families were the social unit ethnographically studied, and the field turned out to be the space in which the subjects relate with the

soap opera and among them. This involved a process of interaction with social actors in the pursuit of their points of view, assessments, feelings. The insertion allowed to "fabricate" a set of cognitive and experiential settings essential for the understanding of the ways of seeing, appropriations and uses that the subjects perform on the soap opera.

From the technical point of view, we used participant observation, in-depth interview, the projective technique and discussion group.

Participant observation was conducted in the familiar world of subjects, specifically before, during and after the airing of the soap operas. With it, we collected non-verbal information on issues difficult –by their naturalness– to raise awareness about and, therefore to express. The in-depth interviews were geared to verify and expand issues identified from the observation and explore other vitally important. They were conducted in the field and all members of the families were involved.

The projective technique used was the completion of sentences, specially re-conceptualized for the study. This tool globally inquired in interests, satisfactions, needs, and preferences of the subjects regarding Brazilian soap operas. The discussion group involved all members of the families, which exposed their ideas and experiences on the why, who and what of the reception of soap operas. This led to the identification of similarities and differences in this regard.

It is important to clarify that the techniques used were conceived in a relationship of complementarity, in order to articulate a multi-referential vision on the object of inquiry.

The possibility of using multiple techniques in the study of a single object was a crucial element to obtain a fuller picture of the investigated phenomenon. Thus, the analysis of the information collected was done in the light of a qualitative perspective of research. It was based on strategies of triangulation of sources (empirical and documentaries), techniques and data analysis, which generated greater confidence in the obtained results. Explanations, valuations, meanings and experiences of the subjects, their interactions and activities, as well as impressions and experiences obtained during the field work, were some of the data described and interpreted in a contextual way.

RESULTS

The soap opera organizes the family time, forwarding or postponing certain household activities. In this regard, the family rituals tend to be different and are determined by the customs and rules of the home, as well as the dynamics of its members; however, they lead to common ground.

In the PSA family, family duties and daily activities (for example, the bath and the food) that precede the viewing are provided so that they do not coincide with the start of the soap opera. The beginning of the viewing is consistent with the time chosen to break with the tasks of the day. In the PSM family, the gathering begins moments before the soap opera, in particular with the meal time. And even if this time is not modified by it (as that is a very ingrained ritual), some members rush their other activities. In the PSB family, practices that precede the viewing also revolve around the food, which is done with enough time to see the soap opera. In this case, one of the members waits for the start of the broadcast, while others incorporate promptly before the expectant family alert.

Everyday family practices associated with the previous moments of viewing do not have an individual character, but collective, and reach ritual value insofar as they are part of the daily routine. Despite the distinctive characteristics of each family, we found that night is the time of meeting and gathering, and the soap opera regulates, in one way or another, the family behavior.

TIME TO 'DISCONNECT': MOTIVATIONS AND SATISFACTION...

Even though the motivations are subjective individual configurations, inside families there are similarities in the needs that the subjects meet with the use of the television genre. The location of the family in a specific socio-economic context conditions the deployment of senses and meanings in correspondence with the philosophy of life of each (or family subjectivity). However, the entertainment is the common denominator, since the soap opera operates as a space of gratification, enjoyment and pastime.

An intrinsic look into the motives and needs that the subjects meet reveals the following.

In the PSA family, the main motivations of the viewing are the possibilities provided by the soap opera to disconnect from reality, and its operation as a means of distraction and entertainment. For these

subjects, the essential value attributed to soap operas is that they operate as a resource of escape from the daily routine, being an alternative to ease tensions. They claim that the key to the success of one or another lies in their ludic edge.

PSM family also identifies with the motivations recognized in the previous family, but the range of satisfaction broadens. In this case, the soap opera is valued from the possibilities of teaching --and thus, learning--elements of another culture, another country. The centrality of the product lies in the presentation of novel cultural behaviors, as, for example, the forms of dress, ways of acting on a daily basis and lifestyles. The cultural openness provided by the Brazilian soap opera becomes a source of motivation and validation by the subjects. Simultaneously, for these, the soap opera is a reference point of behaviors and attitudes that can be imitated, either in the achievement of goals or in interpersonal conflicts resolution. It even channels in a certain way the aspirations of the individuals who identify with certain characters, project their ideals, desires and needs. In a general sense, this family is characterized by a strong emotional involvement with the themes and characters.

The emotions aroused by the soap opera often encourage communication between the members of the PSM families, since they express their views on sensitive issues for them and/or the family group in its entirety, their views about how a character should act and declare their desire to punish those who act in a manner contrary to the individual conceptions. No less important for them is the visual and aesthetic pleasure. They prefer modern soap operas and satisfaction is derived from the spectacle offered by them. The interest lies in areas such as fashion, the physical beauty of the actors, scenarios, even if they require a greater social commitment in the sub-themes.

It is interesting that in the PSB family --in which the soap opera is also of great significance to escape the usual concerns-- satisfactions are associated with adequate or positive conflict resolution matching or related to the family personal concerns. This generates an identification process which reaches its maximum extent when the subjects resolve their major concerns. Another motivating element is the good performances: the quality of personification is a decisive factor in the approval or rejection of the character, plot, situation.

LIVING THE SOAP OPERA: PROCESSES OF APPROPRIATION

The processes of appropriation of the soap opera show that quality of the text of enriching and being constantly enriched, because from these “silent practices” the re-appropriations and resignification of the contents displayed on the television melodrama are produced.

The importance attributed to the soap opera genre comes from two key areas: the entertainment with which it is associated and its educational values.

For the PSA family, the main value assigned to the soap opera is the entertainment it provides. These individuals tend not to get emotionally involved with the text and set a distance between the personal problems and those represented in it. The soap opera is not taken as a referent of reality. Its imagined, fictional character is understood, and the significance made has no application in real life. The members minimize the influence of the melodramatic genre in their everyday lives, and the importance attributed to the fictional product in their personal life has to do exclusively with the possibilities for distraction it presents. In fact, they give soap operas greater importance when they have some documentary, historical value or are based on the literature, so that the most appreciated are those of historical and literary character, because –according to the subjects– they tend to be more faithful to reality and more critical in their arguments.

For the other families, the fundamental value lies in the educational function of the fictional product. The melodramatic text is part of the cultural memory and the life experience of the subjects, which manifests in the form of knowledge and learned behaviors that are updated in certain circumstances. The subjects acknowledge they have used things learned from the soap opera in the upbringing of the children, couple relationships, communication between parents and children and in family life. Other appropriations are related to the achievement of goals and life projects, social mobility and the ability to overcome the difficulties of life. The integration of contents of melodrama and social practices of subjects is evident from all these elements.

Affective processes, which reveal the emotional involvement of the subjects with the soap opera, have different dimensions and intensities. Emotions are not mutually exclusive; sometimes they some manifest

above others, and sometimes they combine themselves. They can also vary from one scene to another and from one product to another.

In the PSA family, emotions and pleasure derived from the exhibition revolve around formal aspects and content of the text itself. In the assessments of the television melodrama, subjects show their abilities regarding the gender. They are able to recognize the codes with which the fictional product operates. The elements related to the artistic treatment, the quality of the performances, the arguments and the narrative structure are the elements that trigger the emotion in subjects.

Depending on the interest that the story may raise, the emotional processes involved are of gratification or enjoyment, or aesthetic pleasure. In the first case, the plot is followed with interest and while there is no emotional involvement, monitoring the chapters raises curiosity and enthusiasm. This can vary from a soap opera to another: if the narrative scheme does not arouse great interest, emotions are primarily derived from its perception as artistic product. In these cases, the feelings are moved by the syntactic or formal qualities of the text (for example, the quality of design, music, scenery, photography and performance) and, therefore, the predominant emotions are manifested as aesthetic pleasure.

In the PSM and PSB families occurs, to a greater extent, the identification and empathy with characters and situations. The subjects identify themselves by being involved intense and passionately in the plot, and assuming as their own values and perspectives of the character. Derived emotions are often showed by nonverbal expressions (laughter, crying, facial and bodily responses...). In any case, the positions of empathy do not imply the assumption of traits and worldviews. I.e. the subjects live intensely the presented situations, but they fail to share characteristics and values of the characters. This relates to the origin of the product, as the comparison made between the reality presented by the Brazilian soap opera and the family and social reality of the subjects shows distances that hinder the recognition with the characters and conflicts of the fictional product. In the PSM family we also appreciated, although to a lesser degree than in PSA, emotions generated by the perception of the soap opera as artistic product (aesthetic pleasure). This element is absent in the PSB family: there are no criticisms related

to content or its formal qualities, their assessments are essentially moral.

The *appropriation of codes or behaviors* presented in the Brazilian soap opera has had its correlation in everyday life and social interaction of the subjects. However, in the PSA family that is not explicitly recognized, because the impact of the text on the behavior of its members fails to be determining. In the remaining families, certain apprehensions, which even have similar traits, are observed. The internalizations made include the adoption of attitudes and models of behavior of the characters, the understanding of family dynamics from a process of comparison between the text and the reality, the recapitalization of personal experiences and motivation for decision-making and facing obstacles.

In the case of the PSB family, the conception of the soap opera as a source provider of answers to problems and conflicts has a marked emphasis. The majority of its members declared having adopted, strengthened or restructured behaviors from what they saw on the soap operas.

A common element in all the families was recognizing the appropriation of sentences said by certain characters, almost always friendly. These parliaments have become socially shared codes in everyday communications. Even autochthonous realities—social and family—have been identified from the name of certain characters (for example, a strong flu was named “Nazaré”, a negative character in *Señora del Destino*). The use of these expressions has usually coincided with the period of broadcasting of the soap opera. Only a few are remembered by the subjects, often so vague and ambiguously, which demonstrates the ephemeral nature of this assimilation.

In *spaces of circulation* and resignification, the soap opera weaves an extensive network of conversations and interactions. I.e., it coexists with subjects beyond the time of broadcasting and transgresses the familiar borders to be inserted in the multiple social spaces where those interact.

The soap opera represents a source of socialization to the internal and external of the family framework. Multiple spaces are recognized in all families in which the text is present, and in which the resignification are (re)produced. The differences found were based on places and areas (employment, local, school, social-

group...) of the daily performances of each subject, as well as in certain topics of conversation.

Regarding the latter, it can be seen in the PSA family topics gravitate around the acting interpretation and the contrast or relationship between the situations shown and the Cuban reality; in the PSM family, they revolve around the negative characters, the physical beauty of actors and actresses, relationships, intrigue and some issues of social relevance (e.g., homosexuals, interracial and intergenerational relations); and in the PSB family, on the predictions of the next chapter, the negative behaviors and the course taken by the events.

WAYS OF WATCHING SOAP OPERAS

The activity of the subjects—in its various forms of expression—during their exposure to the soap opera also provides information on the processes of construction and deconstruction of individual and social significations from the text.

The PSA family highly values the quality achieved in the representation. That is why during the viewing stand out comments regarding the scenographies, performances, and artistic values of the soap opera. These subjects, although they do not commit themselves with conflicts and characters, can manifest sympathy for the negative characters when the interpretation of their roles is plausible. Talks on familiar themes often co-exist with the viewing, using the television product as a backdrop. Other specific activities, in addition to talking, can be shared with the viewing (care of the toddler, organization/search for objects, talk on the phone, writing, etc.), so that often it is surprising the capacity developed by the subjects to follow the plot, even in times when this is relegated to the background by other actions.

In the case of the PSM family, subjects discussed certain situations or scenes during the transmission. This interaction is motivated by conflicts that represent an important plot twist or the need for any sympathetic comments about what happened. Scenes and conflicts, as well as personal and physical characteristics of the characters, are widely discussed during the viewing. Performances and credibility achieved from the interpretation of the actors are judged. The existence of rapporteurs, given the gradual incorporation of some members to the place of the viewing, stands out. Occasionally the narration to the other viewer is

requested, but in others, the story begins spontaneously while continuing to pay attention to what happens on the screen. For these subjects, anticipating is a necessary and recurrent practice which links with the desire of overcoming and completion of the intrigues and conflicts presented. The greatest delight and is reached when such forecasts are met and the triumph of the good and the punishment of the wicked come close. Certain tactics of physical rapprochement between couples, from scenes or provoked comments, can also be perceived. The soap opera is the moment chosen by the family to break with obligations and daily work; for this reason, it is not common to perform activities parallel to the viewing.

For its part, the PSB family often shows how the genre promotes the expression of affections and interactions that articulate the constant reconstruction of the family, in an environment of affection and care. Manifestations of affection between mother and children are common while watching the soap opera. Intention and implication in the comments speak eloquently of family values and principles. The family tends to reject attitudes and malicious behavior of the negative characters; even, the subjects can momentarily leave the place of the viewing or fail to see some chapters deliberately when the intrigue and injustice are highlighted. Similarly, they enjoy the victories of the positive characters. Their personal triumphs over difficulties, as well as the primacy of good over evil, are motives for family pleasure. On several occasions the mother uses the reward or punishment received by certain character to illustrate positive or negative attitudes to children. In her case, the viewing is shared with domestic activities, which speaks of the effort that could exist in most humble families to stretch the time to the maximum, so that even leisure time is traversed by daily obligations. The parallel implementation of both activities can mitigate the depletion or wear produced by the task, given the distraction, entertainment and enjoyment that the soap opera gives her.

SAME TEXT, DIFFERENT READINGS: MEDIATOR FACTORS

The socioeconomic status of the families intervenes in the modes of appropriation and social uses given to the soap opera. Such a position is observed from a set of factors that have their correlation in the family

space and time around it, as well as in subjective configurations produced by the subjects.

The physical space, the system of material objects that set up the situations of reception and daily times are elements that imprint peculiarities into the relations established with the television genre. For example, the presence of several televisions (PSA and PSM families) enables viewing from the bedroom, areas that represent a high intimacy from the objective and symbolic point of view; while the existence of a single television (PSB family) makes the viewing a space of meeting and family socialization. In this way, the collective use of the product and the communicative interaction between subjects are mediated by certain socio-economic conditions; in the first instance, by owning one or more televisions.

However, it is valid to acknowledge that, despite the differences in the location of these devices, in all three cases the TV acquires centrality in the life of families, since it occupies a privileged place in the architecture of the house (living room and bedrooms), and even within these it reaches pre-eminence with regard to the other objects in the room.

From the point of view of the symbolic "fabrications" that families perform around the Brazilian soap opera, there are distances and points of contact regarding the main criteria and assessments, the structure of preference and conferred social uses.

In a general sense, while the PSA family prefers historical and traditional soap operas, the modernity and luxury represented by Brazilian soap operas and the subjects that reflect social rise are favorite elements of the PSM family. On the other hand, the PSB family prefers themes associated with family relationships and love, which demonstrates a greater attachment to the traditional genre conventions and its melodramatic root. Also, the reading made from the PSA family relate fundamentally to the conception of the soap opera as artistic performance. This is consistent with the discourses of their social position. In the PSM and PSB families, in the soap opera the identification of subjects with the text acquires greater relevance and operates strongly. In particular, PSM highly values the educational character of the soap opera, while the moral commitment with characters and conflicts is typical of the PSB family, which also confers it a marked reference value. Table 1 displays such elements.

Table 1. Main assessments, themes and social uses by family

Families	Main assessments	Preferred themes	Social uses
PSA	<p>These soap operas do not represent accurately the Brazilian reality.</p> <p>They lack a deep treatment in social problems.</p> <p>Excellent and successful performances.</p> <p>Great aesthetic and artistic quality.</p>	<p>Social problems.</p> <p>Events and historical accounts.</p>	<p>Opportunities for entertainment and relaxation.</p> <p>Promote everyday conversations.</p> <p>They provide aesthetic pleasure derived from syntactic or formal values.</p>
PSM	<p><i>The above and in addition:</i></p> <p>They provide practical solutions from the comparison between the text and life situations.</p> <p>They encourage the understanding of personal situations and provide resources to deal with future events.</p> <p>They encourage the learning of different cultural aspects.</p> <p>They have wide and splendid material resources, creating attractive visual elements.</p>	<p>The modern and luxurious life of the Brazilian high class.</p> <p>The problems concerning family, social mobility and loving relationships.</p>	<p>Opportunities for entertainment and relaxation.</p> <p>They promote everyday conversations.</p> <p>They allow alternatives and solutions for personal life.</p> <p>They enable the demonstration of knowledge and skills of gender from the contents of the text.</p> <p>They legitimize attitudes and modes of behavior.</p>
PSB	<p>High concentration in the life of the Brazilian high society to the detriment of the poorest.</p> <p>Symbolic representations of good and evil, from the positive and negative characters, are located at the ends of the bipolar goodness-evil.</p> <p>They provide elements to understand the real-life situations.</p> <p>They help decision making through the personal identification with what is represented.</p>	<p>Family relations focused on the achievement of goals and projects, through the collective efforts of all.</p> <p>Love relationships and in particular situations and conflicts of couples.</p>	<p>They are direct and explicit references to the decision-making in personal life, given the strong moral commitment to characters and situations.</p> <p>Appropriation of modes of behaviors, useful in coping with problems and for social interaction.</p> <p>Opportunities of entertainment and escape from reality.</p> <p>Promote everyday conversations in the family context, as well as in other social spaces.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

Even when the socioeconomic dimension confers various peculiarities to the social uses given to the soap opera by families, there are certain points of convergence in the symbolic operations that they display. The studied households find in it a recreational resource, a space of relaxation and satisfaction that allows them to get away, for a moment, of their immediate realities. The television melodrama operates to them as a promoter of solidarity and family interactions and gives rise to

multiple communicative practices that transcend the time of broadcasting.

No less important are other mediator instances from the individuality of the subjects, which confer uniqueness to the processes of appropriation and social use of the soap opera.

The abilities of the subjects regarding the television genre are nourished, in essence, from their cultural experiences concerning the historical relations with it.

The soap opera is part of their stories of life, and from the established linkages arise and develop rapporteurs, synthesizing and completion abilities that show certain knowledge and skills. From these narrative skills we can accede to the social imaginary of the members of the families, their individual and collective identities (family, group, social) and the codes built as a result of their experiences as viewers. In this sense, we observed the following regularities:

- The codes of the television melodramatic genre locate the subjects in a privileged position for the decoding of the text.
- During the broadcast, certain subjects play the role of rapporteurs in the intermittent presence of others. This promotes sociability and communicative interactions, and puts the rapporteur in a privileged position of power.
- The contents of the text are not narrated as-is, as the rapporteur makes various synthesis showing the role of subjectivity in the resignification of the messages. Omitted or featured items show what is considered important or insignificant for the members of the family.
- The learning acquired as historical Brazilian soap opera viewers develop certain completion abilities, allowing the subjects to complete unfinished, incomplete interrupted narratives.
- Among the topics that most promote communicative interactions are intrigue, conflict solutions and anticipations about the behavior of characters and events related.
- Access to media and communication technologies not only influences the frequency of exposure to the soap operas², but it also influences the narrative skills of the subjects. Those who are consumers of soap operas other than the broadcasted by Cuban television³ have a broad spectrum of cognitive and emotional resources to compare the Brazilian to those produced in other countries.
- Greater rapporteur and summarizing skills in subjects with more attachment to the genre, as well as completion abilities, appear with a better development in those of a higher educational level.

On the other hand, regarding to the use and appropriation of the soap opera by the subjects of

high and low educational level, different behaviors were found. The first set emotional distances in relation to the text; their satisfactions are derived from artistic and aesthetic elements; they make more critical readings of the messages; they recognize the fictional character of the genre, so that it has little influence in daily life; and they prefer the folkloric, historical or literature-based themes. The second show the opposite dimensions: they are emotionally involved with characters and situations; their satisfactions are derived from the close bonds with moral representations; they do readings more committed and naive; they make personal decisions based on messages and morals of the text; and they lean more to the melodramatic root and conventional values of the genre.

From the point of view of gender, it was observed that the female audience leads the organization of domestic time in order to make the viewing a family practice; they tend to perform other activities parallel to the reception; they show greater exposure and fidelity; they establish strong emotional bonds to the text and expresses them; they are attached to issues related to family life, the role of women in society, relationships and the upbringing of children; and they critically assess the personality characteristics and moral traits of the characters. Men, on the other hand, focus their attention on the plot, conflicts and external aspects (physical beauty, way of dressing, comicalness) of characters. There is a greater rapport with the television melodrama by men of low education.

Generational differences articulate other peculiarities in the operations of assignment of meaning. In this way, we found the trend towards identification with characters and situations close to the own age and who were representative of the concerns of the generational group of belonging. Adolescents and young people give greater recognition to the educational function of the soap opera, leaning towards the novel treatment of the genre; they express themselves more critically in their readings, are attracted by visual elements, prefer the reflection of modernity and luxury, as well as complex characters, with nuances, often antiheroes or negative. Adults show more attachment to traditional and historical soap operas, and lean more towards those actors who embody positive values.

SOCIAL USES TYPES

The soap opera enables social uses that, although diverse in their manifestations, present a group character. Such uses are not deployed independently, but articulated. They often tend to disrupt the boundaries between one kind of use and another, so we cannot speak of the pre-eminence of one nor of the exclusive presence of another.

During the soap opera the social uses of facilitation of communication tend to be recurrent. The genre enables socialization practices and multiple communicative interactions between members of the families. The time of viewing is ideal for validating attitudes and behaviors, as well as to externalize gender abilities or knowledge on specific issues to other members of the family. The facilitation of communication conditions the emergence of other uses, such as the abilities/dominion, not in a relationship of subordination, but as articulated elements.

From the uses of affiliation/evasion also appear others, of facilitation of communication, as through the identification and involvement with situations/characters communicative interactions emerge between subjects. From the attachment to certain contents, as well as the escape from the realities inherent to life, may appear uses of social learning, due to the educational possibilities found in the television melodrama. Social learning uses can also be provided in others of abilities/dominion when the teachings found in the text are used to strengthen, restructure or adopt new behaviors, intending to be accepted by other members of the audience.

The unequal socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions express differential modes of appropriation between a family and another. However, there are points of convergence in the types of social uses conferred by the families.

The PSA family grants greater value to the opportunities of entertainment and escape. This highlights the prevalence of the *affiliation/evasion* use, in the sense of breaking with everyday life. Social uses of social learning and abilities/dominion do not found a fertile ground here, because –although the subjects recognize certain educational values of the soap opera– the impersonal nature of its speech manifests the established distances; nor do they tend to apply the contents to their personal life, neither they boast of knowledge regarding the product.

The *affiliation* with themes and characters stands in the PSM family. *Social learning* derived from situations and behaviors of the characters in this family is a privileged space, as the soap opera generates learning through a comparison between fiction and personal experience. It recreates those behaviors likely to be imitated or escaped from. These resignification are experienced as necessary both for individual and social life. This shows the educational value assigned to this product. Moreover, the social uses of *abilities/dominion* manifested as a display of knowledge and skills.

The PSB family presents a moral commitment to the soap opera. *Social learning* stands out as the melodrama is a direct source of necessary learning to everyday life. *Abilities/dominion* uses become more notable than in the other families, by employing the soap opera not only to demonstrate knowledge and skills, but also as a strategy of acceptance and recognition by the rest of the members.

Even if each family focuses its pleasure in different elements of the soap opera, they are all unified by the genre. The similarities between them in terms of the type of social uses have to do with the pursuit of entertainment and the possibilities of escape from the daily routine (*affiliation/evasion*), and the permanence of the genre in everyday conversation (*facilitation of communication*).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The social uses of the Brazilian soap opera constitute a system of social practices made by subjects, which unveils their forms of appropriation and allocation of meanings around it. In this system the inherent economic, socio-cultural, individual and group mediation plays a key role.

The home is the privileged space to interact with the soap opera. It stands as reason of meeting and socialization for the members of the families, whose times and activities make it difficult for the spatial and temporal coincidence beyond the night. The family ambiance is ideal for the approach to social uses, since it is the primary context of recognition of the subjects and appropriation of television melodrama.

The social uses of the soap opera by families highlight how the identities of the text and the family are linked and constantly enriched. The insertion into the familiar world has allowed realizing their

operations of assignment of symbolic meanings. These silent practices may remain hidden even to them, who are often not fully aware of the functions of the soap opera in their lives and the uses that they confer to the fictional product.

The place or places of viewing, as well as the specificity of family dynamics, organize and articulate the ways in which families relate to the television genre. This organization of family time also generates links and solidarity among the subjects. I.e., the soap opera empowers the relational dynamic, subjective and interactive processes, expressing themselves, for example, in the domestic cooperation before the viewing and during it.

On the other hand, watching this product is not particular of other activities. It often facilitates the realization of other practices, unless these imply a total neglect to the text. In this case, the soap opera is there, as a resource to which recur to illustrate a particular situation or to concentrate the attention to some element of interest.

Appropriation systems of the soap opera are crossed by needs of leisure, evasion of reality and emotional involvement, which found its satisfaction with the consumption and use of the product presented. The ability to entertain makes it operate as a cause for gratification, enjoyment and recreation.

Emotional processes deployed by the subjects related to this television genre are diverse, and reveal their emotional involvement with characters, situations and conflicts. The feelings generated, positive and negative, depend on the acceptance, recognition, identification, projection with what is represented.

This joins to the apprehension of certain symbolic codes shown in situations, and/or behaviors of some characters, like daily operating modes. This assimilation realizes the uses of the soap opera in interpersonal relationships and, in essence, in social interaction.

In the multiple social spaces in which subjects are involved, the soap opera becomes subject of communication around which the most dissimilar subjects are generated. In this way, it is not only source of socialization in the domestic sphere, but also in the external to this primary group. The text coexists with the audience beyond the time of broadcasting, generating continuous resignification and appropriations.

In the social uses conferred to the genre also operates a set of factors, socio-economic and individual, in greater or lesser extent and complex interdependence, which mediate and determine the processes of symbolic construction. The socio-economic position has its correlate in the physical and symbolic conditions from which the audience perceives. From the comparison with the everyday reality emanates recognition, projected or not in the text, starting from the establishment of similarities or differences, which has its imprint on the structure of choice of families. The mediating instances proceeding from the individuality of the subjects give them distinctive particularities to their processes of appropriation and use.

The soap opera enables social uses different in their expressions, which are manifested in an articulated way. Social uses of facilitation of communication are visible as they put in game socialization practices and multiple communicative interactions between subjects before, during and after the broadcasting. Other uses of affiliation/evasion also emerge, because the text acts as element of attachment to certain content, as well as of escape of realities and daily routines and, consequently, of relaxation and stress reduction. Social learning may also manifest, since the subjects recognize and apply in everyday life (in both the collective and the individual level) contents and values of what is represented, which speaks of the educational possibilities of the soap opera. Uses of abilities/dominion are deployed from the acceptance of the concepts and roles of certain characters that serve to legitimize attitudes and individual and social behavior. It joins the need for some members to show their knowledge and skills to the rest in relation to the television genre.

Also, it is necessary to integrate the analysis of interpretative strategies deployed by the subjects from the soap opera text with other derivatives of the same textual composition. Textual, artistic, technicians, dramaturgical, thematic and cultural production codes also intervene decisively in the uses. The multiple logics (aesthetic, technological, commercial, socio-psychological) spanning the television melodrama shed light on its impact on the audience, as a cultural phenomenon. All this involves a look at the ways in which the cultural industry co-exists with everyday life.

Even though soap opera is located between the spaces

more consumed and preferred by the population, “the systematization of studies on the subject is not at the level of its cultural relevance in Cuba or of international reflection” (Guerrero, 2010, p. 134). This explains the

need to continue the research on a genre that reaches important dimensions within the consumption of symbolic-cultural products of mass communication, both in Cuba and in other regions.

FOOTNOTES

1. In coordination with the Centre for Studies on Population and Development (CEPDE) of the National Statistics Office (ONE), Cuba.
2. Previous research (see, e.g., Alonso, 1999; Guerrero, 2010) have found that access to other technologies (DVD, computer, etc) affects the degree of exposure of subjects to the soap opera. According to the results of these studies, there is a greater exposure to the genre in subjects with less access to other communication technologies.
3. The current Cuban scenario of distribution and reception of communicative products promotes access to other soap operas by those subjects who have the technological resources required for their viewing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Beatriz Drake Tapia, Cuban, has a degree in Social Communication from the Universidad de La Habana, is a researcher from the Cuban Institute of Cultural Research Juan Marinello. Her areas of interest are communication and culture, and the reception and social use of media.

Yilian Machado Pérez, Cuban, has a degree in Psychology and a Master in Communication Sciences from the Universidad de La Habana. She is professor of Communication Theory and of Research Methodology in Communication of the Department of Social Communication of the Universidad de La Habana. Her areas of interest are communication and culture, and the reception and social use of media.

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