



# Soap Operas and Telenovelas in the Digital Age

## Global Industries and New Audiences

EDITED BY DIANA I. RIOS & MARI CASTAÑEDA

---

# ***Introduction***

Diana I. Rios & Mari Castañeda

When researchers mention that they study popular mass media and specifically soap operas and telenovelas, other scholars, and at times members of the public, become wide-eyed with wonder. They may even suppress laughter. They are indicating surprise or hidden delight that melodramatic serials can be the subject of serious academic deliberation. Why does the study of this televisual genre incite such reactions that other media topics would not? Can television programs that we, the editors, have utilized as ways for spending time with our *abuelitas* (grandmothers), be the basis for generating scholarly work? The answer is, most certainly. In fact, soap operas and telenovelas are watched by millions of people per day around the world, and telenovelas specifically are some of the most important commodity exports from Latin America and are becoming important media exports for other world regions. In addition, telenovelas have become sites for governmental communication (e.g. in the recent U.S. Census), family and community gatherings, connections to culture and identity, and contributors to the public sphere with regard to societal and political issues. As cultural, social, and economic phenomenon, soap operas and telenovelas are worthy of examination and must be studied if we are to understand the role of global media content in the digital age. As these programs continue to be exported and transformed at regional levels, and through digitalization, it is more important than ever to analyze where the genre has been, where it is now and where it is going. This collection brings together original scholarship on melodramatic serials that originate in various parts of the world. The chapters address pressing issues, relevant theories, and debates that are inextricably linked to soap operas and telenovelas as global

industries, as sites for new audiences, and as hybrid cultural products within the digital landscape.

Indeed, along with the rapid transformation of mediated communication, soap operas and telenovelas continue to be persistent theoretical, socio-cultural, and politic-economic global media. Increased technological innovations (for instance, YouTube, Web fan sites, DVDs, mobile communication devices), programming hybridizations, population migrations, and historical tastes are some elements that have fueled the persistence and transformation of these serialized melodramas. This trans-disciplinary, popular mass communication volume will address several overlapping concerns of the melodramatic serial in localized, translocal, and global contexts. The major, interconnected areas to be addressed are the political economy of the global soap opera and telenovela industry, creative writing, visual production, media labor, international-flow patterns, and communication regulatory policies as well as how the serials are used for entertainment-education and health promotions, social learning, subversive practices, unique experiences of ethnic and racial minorities, and intersections of gender and class.

What we call soap operas and telenovelas are mediated serials that are constructed by commercial organizations and consumed by audiences in the United States and around the globe. These dramas have witnessed wide-ranging success in their countries of origin such as in the U.S., Mexico, Brazil, and India, and have gained important export value to countries such as Italy, Israel, Kenya, and Korea. Also, this genre is experiencing tremendous change. This edited volume examines mediated functions of soap operas and telenovelas within changing media industries and how this is intricately connected to the ever-shifting audience. Consequently, our approach to the topic expands the theoretical and empirical analyses from previously established research while anchoring itself in the field of communication.

This book builds on the important work produced by many scholars who have written on melodramatic television. This includes but is not limited to Allen (1985) *To be Continued. . .Soap Operas Around the World*; Hobson (2003) *Soap Opera*; Spence (2005) *Watching Daytime Soap Operas: The Power of Pleasure*; Mazziotti's (2006) *Telenovela: Industria y Practicas Sociales*; and most recently, Benavides (2008) *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America*; and Stavans (2010) *Telenovelas*. These works along with many other scholarly books and articles have contributed to the understanding of soap operas and telenovelas as serving functions for viewers, impacting the development of globalized popular culture, and constructing national and transnational audiences. However, gaps in the research exist. More of a comparative global framework is needed along with a broader range of case studies that both include and expand beyond the U.S., U.K.,

and Latin America contexts. Our research offers a global range of content and perspectives. In an effort to accomplish this, the book is divided into four areas. We begin with *Contextualizing the Historical, Industrial, and Cultural Flow of Telenovelas and Soap Opera Productions*, followed by *Global Case Studies of Serial Television Dramas and the Emergence of New Audiences*. The third area is called *Sexuality and Gender as Powerful Forces in Telenovelas and Soap Operas*. Our final area is called *Enduring Issues for Television in the Era of Global Hybridity*. Together, these four areas demonstrate the continuing importance of telenovelas and soap operas in the digital age, and the value that this televisual genre produces as a globalized media commodity and site for community connections. We now turn our attention to brief descriptions of each chapter.

Our first section begins with a chapter by Mari Castañeda titled *Transcultural Political Economy of Telenovelas and Soap Operas in the Digital Age*. The author examines the ways in which trade policies and digital media have impacted the telenovela industry on a global scale. The chapter by Jaime S. Gomez, *Telenovelas from the Rio Grande to the Andes: The Construction of Latin American Identities through Media Production Creative Processes*, provides a descriptive account and analysis of two telenovela producers, including their vision of production and reception. Sung-Yeon Park, Gi Woong Yun, and Soo Young Lee write about the *Emergence of Asian Dramas as a Global Melodramatic Genre: The Case of Korean Television Dramas*. They examine the “Korean Wave,” a prominent media trend in Asia that has direct relevance for Korean drama fans and their online activities. Tamar Ginossar writes about *Media Globalization and “The Secondary Flow”: Telenovelas in Israel*. She examines the processes of production and consumption of telenovelas in Israel.

Section two begins with a chapter by Cacilda M. Rêgo titled *From Humble Beginnings to International Prominence: The History and Development of Brazilian Telenovelas*. Rego examines the history and development of the Brazilian *novela*, and how it has thematically and aesthetically transformed with the times. In the chapter called, *The Cultural and Political Economy of the Mexican Telenovela, 1950–1970*, by Melixa Abad-Izquierdo analyzes telenovelas from the late 1950s to early 1970s and the social and political contexts of post-revolutionary Mexico. Next, Daniela Cardini discusses key moments in the history of the Italian soap opera as a new television genre and the Italian television system in her chapter titled, *Looking for ‘A Place in the Sun’?: The Italian Way to Soap Opera*. Furthermore, *Kenyan Soap Operas as Functional Entertainment: Redefining the Role of Television Melodrama for an Active Audience*, by George Ngugi King’ara, explores soap operas as entertainment,

their functions, and implications for viewers.

The third section begins with a chapter by Petra Guerra, Diana I. Rios, and Robert Forbus called '*Fuego en la Sangre*' *Fires Risky Behaviors: A Critique of a Top-Rated Telenovela and its Sexual Content*. Together these authors argue that telenovelas and soap operas present misleading messages about sexuality and sexual health. Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste writes *Gender, Drugs, and the Global Telenovela: Pimping Sin Tetas no Hay Paraíso*. He critiques a famous Colombian telenovela that presents working-class teenagers moonlighting as prostitutes for drug kingpins. The research by Catherine Medina called *The Third Subplot: Soap Operas and Sexual Health Content for African American and Latino Communities*, addresses how entertainment-education encourages African American and Latino communities to become engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention behaviors. The chapter called *Hybridity in Popular Culture: The Influence of Telenovelas on Chicana Literature* by Belkys Torres, examines the subversive potential of what two eminent Chicana novelists do with telenovelas.

The fourth and final area of this collection begins with a chapter by Martín Ponti titled *Globo vs. Sistema Brasileira de Televisão (SBT): Paradigms of Consumption and Representation on Brazilian Telenovelas*. He describes how the success of a particular Brazilian telenovela enabled SBT to gain audiences who were traditionally faithful to Globo's telenovelas. The chapter titled '*Trashy Tastes*' and *Permeable Borders: Indian Soap Operas on Afghan Television*, by Wazhmah Osman explores how and why Indian soap operas are one of the critical factors in the current Afghan cultures wars with their contesting claims of Afghan identity. This is followed by Courtney Brannon Donoghue's *Importing and Translating Betty: Contemporary Telenovela Format Flow within the United States Television Industry*. She examines the rise of Ugly Betty as a transnational cultural product. The final chapter of the collection is by Christa Salamandra who writes *Arab Television Drama Production in the Satellite Era*. Her work is grounded in field research among drama creators in Damascus and programming executives in the United Arab Emirates and she explores the cultural politics of musalsal (literally "series") production in the satellite era.

In conclusion, we foresee that our collective research will contribute to as well as expand the established literature on soap operas and telenovelas. The breadth, depth and originality of all the chapters demonstrate the richness of the genres and their long-term significance as the televisual landscape evolves and becomes increasingly reliant on technological and creative innovations.

We are grateful to many people for helping us bring this project to fruition. Many thanks to our authors for their participation in this important intellec-

tual endeavor and for their valuable research contributions on global melodrama. We would also like to thank series editor Toby Miller, Mary Savigar and Sophie Appel at Peter Lang, and anonymous reviewers for their excellent editorial feedback.

Thanks for institutional support through the Institute of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies at the University of Connecticut and from the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts.

Lastly, *mil gracias* and *merci infiniment* to our families and friends in the United States and abroad—especially, Manuel Fernandez, Ramona C. Rios, Guadalupe Hernandez, Joseph Krupczynski, and Miguel Angel Paredes—for their love, patience and continuous support throughout this project. This collaboration would not have been possible without all of you.