

New wine in old wineskins. The melodramatic matrix of the telenovela and contemporary cultural changes in gender identities

*Vino nuevo en odres viejos. La matriz
melodramática de la telenovela y
los cambios culturales contemporáneos
en las identidades de género*

ROSARIO SÁNCHEZ VILELA¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2020.7505>

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2995-0520>

This article aims to study how melodrama, constitutive of the Latin American telenovela, incorporates the new sense conformations of contemporary society. The text proposes a reconstruction of the network of genres that constitutes the telenovela to find some explanatory keys, while analyzing the gender identity of some illustrative characters. It is concluded that the melodramatic matrix places in a manageable universe the irruption of the new, integrates it in the conformation of common sense and continues with its prescriptive and moralizing function, contributing to the configuration of a new hegemony.

KEYWORDS: telenovela, melodrama, social change, preferred senses, gender, identities.

Este artículo se propone estudiar cómo el melodrama constitutivo de la telenovela latinoamericana incorpora las nuevas conformaciones de sentido de las sociedades contemporáneas. El texto propone una reconstrucción del entramado de géneros que componen a la telenovela para encontrar allí algunas claves explicativas, a la vez que analiza la identidad de género de algunos personajes ilustrativos. Se concluye que la matriz melodramática coloca en un universo manejable la irrupción de lo nuevo, lo integra en la conformación del sentido común y continúa así con su función prescriptiva y moralizante, contribuyendo a la configuración de una nueva hegemonía.

PALABRAS CLAVE: telenovela, melodrama, cambio social, sentidos preferenciales, género, identidad.

How to cite:

Sánchez Vilela, R. (2020). New wine in old wineskins. The melodramatic matrix of the telenovela and contemporary cultural changes in gender identities. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e7505. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2020.7505>

¹ Universidad Católica del Uruguay, Uruguay.
rsanchezvilela@gmail.com

Submitted: 07/06/19. Accepted: 24/10/19. Published: 15/01/20.

INTRODUCTION

The structuring components of melodrama have been linked to interpretative patterns, which could be labelled as conservative. Nevertheless, the melodramatic matrix has embraced new identity representations in the telenovela; it has been the narrative means through which situations of inequality and subjection have been reported and expressed. What makes this possible? How can melodrama express, discuss or enter into conflict with new sense formations in contemporary societies?

The versatility of the melodramatic device, its ambiguity and constitutive breach has been repeatedly mentioned and by means of these, it can question what it apparently defends (Semilla Durán, 2013, p. 25). Since its origins, melodrama has played with the stress limits create and with transgression (Gledhill, 2018, p. XII) in a way that:

It naturally seems to respond to the setting of social, ideological, sexual or cultural mechanisms of exclusion, whether in order to justify them or reject them, and as a result the wide variety of readings and re-readings, writings and rewritings at every historical event (Semilla Durán, 2013, p. 33).

The aim of this work is to rebuild the interweaving of genres, which has shaped and defined the conformation of the telenovela as a product of the audiovisual industry and in this way find explanatory keys that give answers to the initial questions.

The hybrid nature of the telenovela as genre² has allowed for the inclusion of new identity and affective representations, apart from

² It is necessary to remark that in this article, telenovela is regarded as genre and not strictly as format. I will not deal with the arguments for this starting point because it would lead to an article in itself, but I briefly point out that regarding the telenovela as genre implies taking into account aspects which refer to format –features of serialization related to quantity, frequency, closure or opening of its narrative– but above all features which refer to the fiction universe being depicted, and melodrama is at its center. Borrowing the words of Buonanno (2005), it is understood that the “mass and filling” are part

including new themes in the fiction program.³ The combination of what is epic, tragic and comic –with the corresponding range of characters– in the syncretism of melodrama offers opportunities to deal with old themes and to include what is new and conflicting. But above all, what will be supported here is that the melodramatic matrix of the telenovela can control change and its revulsive nature. The melodrama organizes, embraces, controls and standardizes. It places what is new in a universe, which can be controlled as well as including it in the construction of a new common sense. In this way, the melodrama continues being prescriptive and moralizing, contributing towards shaping a different hegemony.

The starting point is a theoretical approach in which those genre conditions that make it possible to include novelty are studied and at the same time, we resort to some key ideas of Hall (2005) regarding preferred senses or, in other words, the way in which certain definitions of situations and different dimensions of social life prevail. Then, we proceed to go over paradigmatic cases of Latin American telenovela in which the tension between tradition and novelty is expressed, focusing on female characters, and to finally analyze two transgender characters in the telenovelas *Querer sin límites (A força do querer, 2017, Brazil)* and *100 días para enamorarse (2018, Argentina)*. These characters represent conflicts and unprecedented identity approaches in Latin American telenovelas and they illustrate its role in the process of naturalization and denaturalization of identity models. Naturalization and denaturalization are understood to be a process by which the interpretation patterns, “preferred reading” in terms of Hall (1973), is transformed: new patterns become part of common sense and the prevailing ones, thus naturalized are questioned as indicators of “what

of the formation of genre. The industrial dimension of the format linked to logistics of production and diffusion do not go unnoticed. On the contrary, it is considered because of the impact in the formation of genres.

- ³ Divorce, celibacy, abortion, sexual diversity, new affection arrangements and family models have been presented and discussed in the narratives of telenovela. They reveal transformations in contemporary societies, long lasting which comprise at least the past four decades.

you need to be". The appearance of new gender identities in the telenovela means the denaturalization of others (Sánchez Vilela, 2016).

THE PROCESS OF SYNCRETISM WHICH LEADS TO TELENVELA

The telenovela is the outcome of a long process of syncretism, encounters, crossings and combinations of diverse genres all throughout history, acknowledging the double statement made by Todorov (1996): all genres derive from another genre; all genres eventually refer to some sort of human communication (pp. 50-65).

The first syncretism that the telenovela reveals is the one of the narrative and the representation. In other words, in the telenovela there exist narrative features that generically connect it to the novel, but at the same time, it is a kind of dramaturgy and its roots go back to the moralizing and cathartic function of tragedy, which is also present in melodrama.

At the core of narrative legacy, the origins of the components of the telenovela date back to the ancestral forms of oral narrative and connect with different forms of popular literature moving from oral to written forms. In this way, storytelling around the fire, at the end of the day or the singing of aedae and rhapsodes are part of this long tradition. Transition between oral and written form to which *colportage* belongs and cordel literature on whose pages the image of engraving was becoming more and more popular. A kind of collective and oral reading is developed which surpasses those who can read (Darnton, 1996), which also became apparent in the brochure of the 19th century.

In the history of these narrative landmarks, works appear in which the story responds to the need of occupying time: in this way, the long journey of pilgrims becomes shorter with stories such as *Los cuentos de Canterbury* (*The Canterbury Tales*) or being locked up because of the black death gives rise to the need to occupy idle time in *El Decamerón* (*The Decameron*). In other occasions, for example, with *Las Mil y Una Noches* (*One Thousand and One Nights*), the narrative is used to buy time. These works depict the way oral narrative behaves and the use of specific features of serialization and expectation: the pleasure of receiving one story every day.

From these quite brief stories, which appear in a narrative frame that embraces them, but with no connection among them (that is to say, lacking in what is known today as a storyline which continues from one tale to the other) such as the works mentioned above, narrative takes a qualitative leap with the appearance of the modern novel (with Cervantes and *El Quijote* (*Don Quixote*)). What the telenovela inherits from the novel, apart from its name, is the intention and pretension of offering a complete and total universe, ruled by regulations, which imitate those of the extradiegetic world. The multiple plots, wide range of characters that exist in different social, time and space levels, are resources which help to create the illusion of wholeness (Sánchez Vilela, 2000, p. 24).

In the Río de la Plata, the telenovela and soap opera have been used indistinctively in order to refer to this kind of television program. In fact, at the very beginning, “soap opera” was the term that prevailed and its most prestigious program was announced as “Teleteatro Palmolive del Aire”. While the term telenovela refers to the narrative connection, soap opera refers to the area of enactment.⁴ The telenovela is a kind dramaturgy, which inherits the melodramatic matrix of a plebeian theater, performed on the outskirts and made to resort to excess and to a spectacular nature. Melodrama constitutes a key point in this story of interweaved genres that converge in telenovela.

The historicity and institutionality of the genre (Todorov, 1996) enable us to identify the configuration of the matrix of melodrama. This will be affected by the melodramatic imagination, which will go beyond the drama scene, penetrating in the novel and in the feuilleton.

In this way, melodrama reaches the telenovela from the theater, but also from its narrative legacy because the melodramatic imagination permeates the novel of the 19th century. This appears in the name of the work by P. Brooks (1976) *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac*,

⁴ The Aristotelian distinction of kinds of mimesis: “either by introducing someone who tells a story or who becomes something else, the way Homer does; or the same poet talking without changing his person; or making believe that the representatives are busy in their homes”, that is to say, the imitation of action with no need for a narrator (Aristotle, 1948, p. 25).

Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess, in which the use of rhetoric in excess in the narrative of these authors is analyzed.

The clearest antecedents of serialization also derive from the novel, especially from the *roman feuilleton* from the 19th century in France, a daily publication and not monthly the way the British *feuilleton*⁵ was. Balzac, in *La solterona* (1836) “The Old maid” provides the first example of a daily *feuilleton*, although it had been completely written before being published. But apart from the characteristics of serialization, what we are interested in is the appearance of melodramatic imagination whose development included new settings, characters and themes: *Los tres mosqueteros* (*The Three Musketeers*), *El conde de Montecristo* (*The Count of Montecristo*) by Alejandro Dumas; *Los misterios de París* (*The mysteries in Paris*) by Eugene Sue promotes a sensationalist narrative, full of dramatic effects, violence and dark forces which also had a British counterpart, with horror stories and brutal murders. *El collar de perlas* (*The String of Pearls*) by Sweeney Todd o *Los misterios de Londres* (*The mysteries of London*), by Reynolds (De la Torre, 2016, p. 24); the telenovela will develop from these works.

The syncretism of melodrama

Melodrama is in itself a full expression of syncretism or genre hybridization. The etymology of the term refers to the fusion of music

⁵ Literature in installments became popular in Victorian England. The Stamp Act imposes a tax on newspapers and as a result they decided to enlarge the size of the paper to be considered a leaflet and to avoid the tax. The need arises to fill in a space, which will be covered with extracts of novels. At the beginning they were novels that had already been written and had not been thought of as serialized novels. Later, novels thought of as serial literature were developed: *David-Copperfield* by Charles Dickens (20 publications between 1849 and 1850) is one of the most paradigmatic works of this change. The novels which were originally written as serial literature introduce narrative changes: the first chapter has to hook the reader; each publication has to arise interest in itself but leave the reader expectant for the next one (*cliffhanger*). The *feuilleton* becomes a system of production, which needs to adapt to the requirements of the market; that is to say, to what is now called format.

(melos) and the drama which evidences a connection with the opera (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009, p. 17). In French Literature, J. J. Rousseau introduces it with *Pygmalión* and defines it as “a kind of drama in which words and music, instead of appearing together, appear one after the other and where the spoken words are announced and prepared for the musical words” (Rousseau in Pavis, 1990, p. 304). From this starting point, the connection with the telenovela becomes evident.

The syncretism implicit in its name increases its complexity as melodrama multiplies throughout time in a way in which its limits are constantly being redefined, as Gledhill (2018) points out:

The melodramatic distinctiveness resides then in the way it works as a pattern: as a kind of aesthetics link that can be adapted to a range of genres, throughout decades and throughout national cultures. Instead of defining the content, the pattern reshapes different materials for a specific goal. This goal, which characterizes melodrama, is what sets it apart other patterns –realism, romance, comedy–, but which nevertheless, uses in accordance with its subgenre needs. As a result, melodrama prospers as comedy, can show fatal encounters in romance and in order to guarantee the authenticity of its statements and the acknowledgement of the audience, it keeps the rhythm of plausibility conventions (what is considered true) and the expansive limits of realism (enlargement of the performance). If the melodramatic pattern is acknowledged for its effects, then its structuring devices and dramatic mechanisms used to achieve such goals change according to the needs of the evolving subgenres, the changing historic events and the specific national cultural settings (pp. XIII-XIV).

The widest expansion of the different dimensions of the syncretism of melodrama was expressed during its development in the 19th century. It was articulated in this way by Martín-Barbero (1987) thirty years ago when he highlighted the feature of “total performance” in which four feelings converge –fear, enthusiasm, pity and laughter– which are linked to four types of characters: traitor, avenger, victim, fool (p. 128). In this way, typical elements of the black novel are combined: saga, tragedy and comedy.

This hybrid nature of melodrama is one of the most relevant keys in the future of Latin American telenovela because it has allowed for diverse theme developments, by means of the expansion of some of these dimensions and emotional issues. As a result, together with works in which the dark side of evil men and women prevails (*Topacio*, Venezuela, 1985; *Manuela*, Argentina, 1991; *Cuna de Lobos*, México, 1986), there appears a development of a female epic (from *Simplemente María*, Argentina, 1967 to *Tieta*, Brazil, 1989), or funny stories (*Muñeca Brava*, Argentina, 1998, o *Tititi*, Brazil, 1985).

The telenovela has been able to accept novelty without losing its genre identity, without being a specific type of text, when it keeps certain loyalty to the melodramatic matrix. At the same time, it is this matrix, which enables it to integrate novelty and cultural changes, which take place in the societies in which telenovelas appear and are consumed. Thus, I want to rebuild and systematize the components of this matrix.

THE MELODRAMATIC MATRIX

Melodrama is usually defined as a kind of performance, historically located at the beginning of the 19th century, after the French Revolution, which arose as an expression and answer to the crisis that originates romanticism. In a world full of unrest and breaching of rules and traditional ways of social cohesion, melodrama works as a healing mechanism (Brooks, 1974). It is not possible for us to stop here to discuss the history of melodrama. Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight the contributions made by the historic research carried out by Buckley (1918) and his observations regarding the roots of melodrama which date back to the 18th and 19th centuries and were not confined to the French context.

Very early, Nodier (1984), playwright and one of the first theorists of melodrama, sees in this trend of restoring the order disrupted by the revolution: the clash between good and evil in the work is necessary, according to the author, to vanish evil from everyday life. In this way, melodrama would be a way of democratizing tragedy and recovering its cathartic role. It values and vindicates the moralizing aim of melodrama and that is why it sees in Victor Hugo and Dumas (in the romantic

melodrama) a downgraded version, which abandons the moral purpose (Nodier, 1971). However, Nodier vindicates the model of melodrama of Guilbert de Pixérécourt. In other words, the classic melodrama in which the evil one will die or will be punished at the end of the story, and virtue will prevail and the knight will marry the innocent and miserable young lady (Buckley, 2009, pp. 177-179; Thomasseau, 1990, p. 27).

Some of the key components of what we call melodramatic matrix come from classic melodrama and they are enumerated below:

- Clash between good and evil embodied in the characters of the Victim and the Villain.
- The male or female Villain is the driving force of melodrama.
- The Victim, characterized by virtue, is the recipient of harm.
- The Victim must evoke compassion and identification (in connection with tragedy).
- The relationship between human quality and physical appearance: Victim and Villain reflect the characteristics of their moral condition.
- Cruel exposure to pain and disgrace.
- Restoration of order: it implies punishment of evil and rewarding virtue.
- The outcome has a cathartic moralizing role.

Nevertheless, changes take place on this essential matrix all throughout the 19th century and melodrama starts showing signs of new cultural tensions. The ideal aspect of domesticity of the middle class, together with the idea of romantic love and social promotion weakens: villains can succeed and the victim suffers from harassment which cannot always overcome. At the end of the 19th century, it receives the realistic and naturalist influence, which gives way to the melodrama of customs. Family dramas appear, lost and found children, apart from current themes: poverty, slums instead of homes and palaces. In other words, the melodrama appears as some kind of claim or criticism. In this way, Cawelti (1991) sees in Dickens a key character in the development of social melodrama, starting from melodramatic conventions, but integrating a complex and realistic vision of themes related to urban

life and poverty, combining melodramatic stories and social criticism (Cawelti, 1991, p. 36).

Beyond the transformations and variants which are included in each stage, the matrix of melodrama is crossed by rhetorical strategies by means of which the new themes or arrangements (new family settings, new identity representations, new social and/or environmental threats) become part of a certain known order:

1. The aesthetics of excess: clear antithesis in the polarization of characters (victim-villain), but also in the hyperbole of emotion and/or violence.
2. The aesthetics of acknowledgement: good is acknowledged, virtue is rewarded, the traitor is punished, and this is why Brooks (1974) calls melodrama, “acknowledgement of drama”.
3. Aesthetics of repetition: the genre conventions, the recurring narrative themes, work with knowledge the audience possesses and this other way of acknowledgement is apart from a source of pleasure, a way of ordering chaos, catastrophes, disgrace, evil.

MELODRAMA RECEIVES WHAT IS OLD AND NEW:

TENSION AND BALANCE BETWEEN CONSTANTS AND VARIANTS

Despite the malleability that the historicity of the genre and its syncretism have shown, the structuring components of melodrama that have been covered so far are linked to interpretative and representational patterns which could be qualified as coming from conservative ideas. Nevertheless, its relationship with the social and cultural environment in each historic event is more complex: melodrama is:

Particularly dependent in one sense on what is a proper, acceptable and plausible environment in order to guarantee the triumph of virtue despite the terrible force of vice. This sense of the correct order of things justifies the coincidences and the accidents of melodramatic action and reveals, in a surprising way, the conventional moral vision that a specific culture and period wish to see supported by the astonishing strokes of fate which characterize the structure of melodrama (Cawelti, 1991, p. 34).

Melodrama reveals in this way the moral vision of a moment; it expresses its dominant themes and conflicts, it may defy traditional order but at the same time it rebuilds a new order, it becomes part of a process of establishment of patterns with preferred meanings.

Using Hall's words (2005):

Every society or culture tends, with different degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social, cultural and political world. These classifications have become a dominant culture, although this is neither unique nor irrefutable. The matter of the "structure of dominant speeches" is a crucial point. The different aspects of social life seem to appear within discursive domains hierarchically organized through dominant or preferred senses (p. 123).

Preferred sense domains become institutionalized by means of a process of naturalization through which the new reading patterns become part of common sense: "The preferred sense domains are embedded in and contain all the social order as a whole with regard to groups of meanings, practices and beliefs: everyday knowledge of social structures, the way things work for all practical purposes of this culture" (Hall, 2005, p. 124). The author points out that these dominant readings (although not decisive) "are hegemonic precisely because they represent definitions of situations and events which are in a situation of dominance" (p. 126).

The structure of the media text –of the telenovela in our case–, the processes involved in its production and encoding give way to a "preferred reading"; that is to say, an interpretative direction which is applied by the text, and which responds to preferred reading patterns; in other words, a dominant culture order or in the process of becoming dominant.

Hall's hegemonic point of view is understood as the point of view:

Which defines the mental horizon or universe of possible meanings and of a whole section of relationships in a society or culture; which carries the seal of recognition –it seems to coincide with what is "natural", "unavoidable" or obvious" regarding the social order"–. (Hall, 2005, pp. 126-127).

Interpretative boundary and legitimacy in the interpretation are two characteristics of preferred reading which build media text.

The new and problematic events will locate themselves in the existing maps. In this ambiguity is where change and repeatability reside. Melodramatic conventions, character and action stereotypes reveal the degree in which certain ideas and values prevail social; this is in the essence of melodrama. These new genre representations in telenovelas show this dominance and are part of their naturalization process and of the establishment of a new hegemony (Sánchez Vilela, 2016, p. 62).

Melodrama, and more specifically melodramatic imagination, as has already been mentioned here, manifests a way of perceiving the world, an answer to social pressures, which goes beyond authors and specific texts in which it is expressed (Landy, 1991, p. 31).

About victims and villains

The female characters have become a good angle to answer the questions we posed at the beginning of the article. The appearance of the melodramatic matrix in telenovela is shown in the persistence of female characters in the role of villains and victims, but both categories are open to a range of women and a kind of treatment in which what is new becomes part of what is old, but not without certain stress.

In this way, there are villains who can cause compassion and there are victims who are capable of being evil and/or embark themselves in heroic quests of self-liberation, with no need for an avenger or hero. They are victims because some harm will befall them, but they stop being victims to become heroines. Some examples will illustrate this combination of what is old and what is new.

In *Selva de Cemento* (1985, although there is an earlier version from 1972), both female characters that play the role of villain and victim are Fernanda and Simona, respectively. In both characters, ambiguous and transgressive melodramatic conventions appear.

In the case of Fernanda, we are facing a special villain: a sensitive and fragile character hidden behind a shield of apparent coldness and pride. The only time the character decides to break her boundaries is when she falls in love with Cristiano, who dumps her at the altar

dressed in white. This is the key moment when her character changes and becomes the villain. This transformation takes place at the same time her wedding dress is torn when she leaves the church and she starts dressing in black. This exterior transformation is typical of melodrama in which the expression of evil becomes apparent through physical characteristics (deformities, ugliness, but also through the costumes). The wedding theme is used a second time to highlight the change: later in the story, Fernanda enters the church wearing a formidable black wedding dress. In this kind of villain, the source of her wickedness is explained and it is a mad version of a villain, who changes from being the victim of a male character to being the aggressor.

Fernanda acts as a typical villain: she sets obstacles in the heroine's path and harms her. Out of spite and the pain of having been dumped, her obsession for Cristiano leads her to the kidnapping of Simona who almost dies from starvation.

Nevertheless, in the final episodes the villain awakens some kind of compassion. Fernanda's black color changes into white after a scene in which there is some sort of transfiguration: she soaks her hands in water, washes her face and removes the dark make-up that characterizes her. The image of Fernanda dressed in a white wedding dress, sitting in a beautiful garden, engulfed in delusion, being surrounded little by little by her family who painfully contemplate her insanity, until the image becomes a typical wedding photograph. Punishment and pity become one when dealing with this villain.

The variants and novelties in female characters coexist with the repetition of traditional models. In this way, the villain type is very different in *Cuna de Lobos* (Mexico, 1986) and more related to the Gothic novel and the feeling of dread (Martín-Barbero, 1987). In the Gothic novel, evil is inextricably linked to the physical appearance. The character of Catalina Creel is the one of a villain whose appearance shows how evil she is: she seems to be lacking an eye, she always wears a patch, which matches the color of her dress. The patch is an external sign of how evil she is, and at the same time, the instrument used to blame her stepson. The rhetoric of excess is expressed by how cruel and violent she can be: she poisons her husband, she stabs a poker in the tummy of her pregnant daughter-in-law, she sets fire to

a retirement home full of elderly people, and more. In the moral economy of melodrama, she must be punished and this is what happens. But in the darkest tradition of melodrama, evil is a persistent force. At the end of the telenovela, the characters have been freed from the villain and they are leading happy lives, but one of Catalina's grandchildren, her favorite one, is playing and suddenly he is shown with a patch on his eye: evil lives on in "little Edgard", the way her grandmother called him. The Gothic quotation is completed.

Cuna de Lobos is a clear example of the aesthetics of repetition: the main themes of the telenovela (bastardy, an identity that needs to be uncovered, the villain's secrets which need to be unveiled) enable the viewer to experiment the pleasure of repetition and entertaining exercise of acknowledging what is already known. The villain here, unlike Fernanda in *Selva de Cemento*, has no ambiguities and all the story revolves around the melodramatic axis of the polarization of good and evil. They are telenovelas of the same decade, with a year apart, which appeared on Latin American screens at the same time and with very different representations of good and evil.

In *Selva de Cemento*, the victim, Simona, repeatedly becomes the object of harm and in the final scenes it becomes similar to a version of the kidnapped princess. But this victim is a heroine: there is no avenger or savior to free her from her kidnapping and from death; she is the one who does it and besides, she timely reaches the male protagonist (Cristiano) and saves him from a certain conviction.

From the very beginning, the Latin American telenovelas included female characters who are protagonists in an epic journey, in an improvement path (Ducrot & Todorov, 1985, p. 341). Such is the case of the emblematic *Simplemente María*, an Argentinian telenovela from 1967, which would later have a Peruvian and a Mexican version, apart from a more recent edition called *Rosa de Lejos* in 1980. María is a young woman who moved to the city, illiterate, fooled by a young rich man who gets her pregnant and then dumps her, but she betters herself: she becomes educated and ends up being a reputed figure in haute couture. The prize to virtue is explicit: hard work and sacrifice lead you to better yourself.

Simplemente María was read as a story which fostered the development and autonomy of women. Nevertheless, in this fiction

the female character is not the protagonist of a story of liberation yet. The telenovela will enable women to become protagonists in this kind of story, but above all in characters that belong to supporting stories. Brazilian telenovelas are the ones that have best exploited this possibility. They are, in general, middle aged women like Simone in *De Cuerpo y Alma* (1992) or Toña in *Tieta* (1989), who get rid of their husbands, rediscover their bodies and their initiatives. *Roque Santeiro* (1985), opens a diverse range of women in its multiple stories, but above all in the emblematic character of Lulu, wife of Zé de las Medallas: mother, wife –always at home helping her children and husband– rebels against this situation and drastically changes her life.

The vindication twist, or in general terms feminist twist, starts appearing in Argentinian telenovelas at the beginning of the 90s: *La Extraña Dama* (1989-90), *Antonella* (1992), *Perla Negra* (1994), *Cosecharás tu Siembra* (1991), to name a few; but as it is pointed out by Mazziotti (1996):

Her rebelliousness is a verbal attitude: it does not go hand in hand with the whole of her actions or with the development of the story. They are feminist statements, not included in the story, and they do not imply a total transformation in the traditional role of heroine (p. 149).

Characters and situations, bodies and actions in the telenovela were and still are bearers of conflict speeches. In this way, the representation of femininity subjected to the patriarchal view, virginal and destined to motherhood becomes distorted while at the same time the process of naturalization represents a proactive woman, displaying diverse possibilities for development and even in a dominant position (Sánchez Vilela, 2000). Nevertheless, the traditional identities have not disappeared. Old and new representations coexist, even in the same story and in general there is a wedding in order to solve the story of a character or narrative angle, even if it is a supporting story.

NEW REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IDENTITIES

The appearance of new identities, ways of behaving and social relationships on television fiction reflect in certain ways the tolerance range that the societies that produce and consume them have. In this sense,

they have become a naturalization rate. At the same time, visibility and circulation of these new representations allow for symbolic resources that make it possible to imagine identity possibilities, to understand them, and to place yourself in the other person's place (Sánchez Vilela, 2016, p. 66).

We have no intention of going into these transformations in depth, which would lead to an article in itself, but it is necessary to point out some hallmarks in the appearance of new identity representations in the telenovela, most of them in Brazilian productions. *Vale Tudo* (Brasil, 1988) shows a lesbian relationship between two characters and the legal and economic problems that arise after the death of one of the women.⁶ Two important turning points appear in *La Próxima Víctima* (1995) and *Torre de Babel* (1999). In the first one, there is a careful treatment of the relationship between Jefferson and Sandro, young university students who become an interracial couple and in the latter between two sophisticated women whose intimacy is shown. Sex between characters is hinted at but not explicitly shown. The two decades of the 21st century have had productions which followed this line, but the novelties introduced in *Botineras* (Argentina, 2009) stood out. They include a romantic relationship between two football players, and their naked bodies are shown. The kiss between homosexual characters appeared for the first time in this telenovela and years later in *Rastros de Mentiras* (Brazil, 2013), the first kiss between homosexuals appeared on Brazilian television.⁷

In the past few years, some telenovelas have been released in Latin America which have integrated a wide range of identity possibilities which, due to their position in the melodramatic matrix in fiction works, ended up being accepted or, in other words, integrated in the group of accepted values, on the side of good and virtue, winning the adhesion and empathy of the audiences.

6 The death of a character has been considered cause of censorship, although some statements indicate that it had already been foreseen in the story.

7 The approach of undetermined and/or flexible gender identities in *Imperio* (Brazil 2015) with the character called Xana or the love situation of Claudio is also innovative.

Two telenovelas, one Argentinian and one Brazilian, released at the same time in 2018 in Uruguay, have become paradigmatic cases: each of them shows a character which goes through a self-discovery process until they consolidate a transgender identity. In this way, Ivana will become Iván in *Querer sin Límites* (Brazil, 2017); Juana will be Juan in *100 Días para Enamorarse* (Argentina, 2018). In both cases, although the characters are not protagonists in the main stories, they are part of the stories of the characters around whom the narrative development evolves and their stories hold an important place in their respective fictions.

The character of Ivana experiments a process of self-discovery which begins with a feeling of uneasiness with her own body, which at the beginning may be interpreted as a self-esteem issue, but which little by little becomes more and more serious: she feels that she does not belong in her body and on the breast is where the rejection is focused (she hits her breast, she wears a corset until in the end she has it removed by means of a surgical procedure).

In this fiction the conflict with the body and with the family is more intensely dealt with than in *100 Días para Enamorarse*. All throughout the life story of the character Ivana/Iván, the exposure to suffering evokes an emotional bond with the viewer. The body as a battlefield is crucial in the dramatic position of the character in *Querer sin Límites*: she experiments the pain of being in it, happiness after the first transformations caused by hormones, more conflict when her body changes because of motherhood and the transgender process is interrupted. On the other hand, in the character of Juana/Juan, the focus of attention of its transformation is in the haircut, in a scene laden with symbolic intensity, and in the change of name, first in her inner circle and then in her identity card.

Nevertheless, both characters are protagonists in a story of progressive advances towards their new identity, struggling to overcome obstacles and difficulties until they achieve the transformation and acknowledgement of their social surroundings. Their stories develop in the field of what is heroic and at the same time they experiment situations which make them victims: they are subject to incomprehension and rejection sometimes, and of discrimination and violence other times.

This place in the melodramatic matrix is key to explain why these characters are rewarded, and their integration is accepted and acceptable. In contrast, those characters who are the driving force behind the harm actions (discrimination or violence) are punished and those who oppose or reject the change (such is the case of Ivana/Ivan's mother) end up understanding and accompanying the process.

The place of these characters who embody these transgender identities in the network of characters of these telenovelas, positions them in a differential relationship, sometimes of opposition, with the identities represented by the other characters, especially the ones from the family and peers. The narrative approach is different in both fictions: while the strong family opposition, especially on the part of the mother and of the brother, works as counterpoint of traditional identity models in *Querer sin Límites*, in *100 días para Enamorarse* the mother accompanies and accepts the transformation of Juana into Juan.

The aesthetics of repetition is the validation support of these new identities that burst in the social setting and in the fiction representation of telenovela. The location of these disruptive personalities in different stages of the narrative, with different levels of relevance (sometimes as supporting characters and sometimes as main characters), in different social classes and diverse ages throughout subsequent telenovelas promotes their acknowledgement in an orderly universe, where everybody gets what they deserve.

The characters we have been through here have received their corresponding award to kindness or reward after suffering. It is precisely the exposure to suffering on the part of the characters which moves the emotions arousing empathy in the audience.

In the telenovela, melodrama is combined with serialization (as it has already happened with the *feuilleton*) and this fusion contributes to the inclusion of what is new, what is disruptive and its integration within an order that becomes comprehensible and acceptable. For this, serialization and time constitute key elements. As Williams (2018) points out:

Series, by nature, need to spend a great deal of time in its narration. Nevertheless, the most important point is that this abundance of time offers

opportunities for the characters of different worlds in the story to interact throughout time. This remark may lead us to the root itself of the special connection of serial melodrama with the time on the television media (p. 178).

The great quantity of time that television can offer strengthens the aesthetics of repetition and the display of emotional nuances:

Time cessation, summarized time and manipulation of time are the basic ingredients of the strong feelings which are provoked by melodrama because melodrama mainly wants us to safeguard its main characters. The more time we invest in their worlds and changes, the more we care (Williams, 2018, p.177).

The melodramatic matrix and serialization have become a device suitable for the integration of what is new to patterns of preferred readings to the configuration of a new prescriptive moral, a reshaping of what is acceptable. The novelty is tamed as it becomes part of a conventional and distinctive universe. In the case of the two characters analyzed, their stories are a new version of the old theme of the hidden identity of a long narrative tradition. The discovery of a secret identity or an unknown identity due to many reasons has been a traditional theme and driving force behind the telenovela and the melodrama. In the case of the characters of Ivana and Juana there is a process of anagnorisis, first of all before themselves and then before the others. The acknowledgement and assumption of the identity, the social acceptance and gaining back the affections equals to the “fair correction” which Mazziotti pointed out (1996, p. 15). The theme of transgender identities becomes part of a distinctive order; key when it comes to understanding and accepting it.

The simultaneous broadcast of these two telenovelas in Uruguay is particularly significant of the arguments which have been developed here. Its broadcast coincided with the discussion that took place about the Integral Law for Transgender People⁸ in the Uruguayan Parliament

⁸ This is the official name of the Act 19684 that was presented in Parliament in 2017, was discussed in 2018, and was passed in October 2018.

in 2018. The media, social networking sites, demonstrations in the street with yellow handkerchiefs as an icon of the vindication of the groups that supported the law, made known patterns which were struggling to become dominant. In this sense, both telenovelas provided information, different concepts, sometimes with an explicit didacticism and others moving the affections in the best melodramatic tradition.

CONCLUSIONS

The hybrid characteristic of the telenovela as genre has allowed for the inclusion of new identity and affective representations, apart from the incorporation of new themes in the fiction area. Its relationship with the novel instills a quest for totality, an intention to generate the illusion that it is a global universe. This characteristic of its genre identity, which makes it possible to diversify the stories and multiply the characters, is the way into new identity representations, themes and social concerns. The combination of what is epic, tragic and comic –with its corresponding range of characters– in the syncretism of melodrama offers interpretative keys for dealing with old themes and for integrating what is new and controversial.

As cultural expression, the telenovela is also a struggle field for meaning, an area where the naturalization of some senses and the denaturalization of others take place and during its course tensions and conflicts become evident. Its characters (bodies, gestures, situations) are part of the tangibility of the social representations (Moscovici, 1979). They integrate the crystallization, which later appear in everyday life as resources for social exchange, as well as for imagining different vital possibilities.

The new relational and identity forms, their repetition in time and the expansion of diverse communication products, move away from the hard core of common sense the gender representations which constitute heterosexual hegemony and give rise to the naturalization of nomad, multiple and flexible identities (Sánchez Vilela, 2016, p. 62).

The new and the old fit in the telenovela because its tension has been at the core of the history of melodrama. Nevertheless, the characteristic of the genre cannot get rid of the moral judgment because

the melodramatic matrix in the telenovela makes it possible to control change and its repulsive feature: it places the irruption of what is new in a universe that can be handled. In this sense melodrama recovers its moral function in the telenovela. By enhancing new models of gender identity and by questioning old patterns it has become a tool of a new moralizing prescription. The new identity models, the new patterns of behavior have become a new rule about what needs to be and what needs to be thought.

Bibliographic references

- Aristóteles. (1948). *Poética*. Espasa Calpe.
- Brooks, P. (1974). Le mélodrame un esthétique de l'étonnement. *Poétique*, 19, 340-356.
- Brooks, P. (1976). *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. Yale University Press.
- Buckley, M. (2018). Umbinding Melodrama. In C. Gledhill & L. Williams (Eds.), *Melodrama Unbound. Across History, Media and National Cultures* (pp. 15-30). Columbia University Press.
- Buckley, M. (2009). Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss. *Theatre Journal*, 61, 175-190. https://english.rutgers.edu/images/documents/faculty/buckley_melodrama.pdf
- Buonnano, M. (2005). La masa y el relleno. La miniserie italiana. *De Signis*, 7(8), 19-30. <http://www.designisfels.net/publicaciones/revistas/7-8.pdf>
- Cawelti, J. G. (1991). The Evolution of Social Melodrama. In M. Landi (Ed.), *Imitations of Life. A reader on Film & Television Melodrama* (pp. 33-49). Wayne State University Press.
- Darnton, R. (1996). Historia de la lectura. In P. Burke (Ed.), *Formas de hacer historia* (pp. 177-208). Alianza.
- De la Torre, T. (2016). *Historia de las Series*. Roca Editorial.
- Ducrot, O. & Todorov, T. (1985). *Diccionario enciclopédico de las ciencias del lenguaje*. Siglo XXI.
- Fuenzalida, V., Corro, P. & Mujica, C. (2009). *Melodrama, subjetividad e historia en el cine y televisión chilenos de los 90*. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

- Gledhill, C. (2018). Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama. In C. Gledhill & L. Williams (Eds.), *Melodrama Unbound. Across History, Media and National Cultures* (pp. IX-XVII). Columbia University Press.
- Gledhill, C. & Williams, L. (2018). *Melodrama Unbound. Across History, Media and National Cultures*. Columbia University Press.
- Hall, S. (2005). Encoding/Decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language. Working Papers in Cultural Studies 1972-79* (pp. 117-127). Routledge.
- Landy, M. (Ed.). (1991). *Imitations of Life. A reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. Wayne State University Press.
- Martín-Barbero, J. (1987). *De los medios a las mediaciones*. Gustavo Gili.
- Mazziotti, N. (1996). *La industria de la telenovela. La producción de ficción de América Latina*. Gedisa.
- Moscovici, S. (1979). *El Psicoanálisis, su imagen y su público*. Huelmul.
- Nodier, C. (1971). *Introducción a Théâtre Choisi*. Slatkin Reprints.
- Pavis, P. (1990). *Le Théâtre au croisement des cultures*. Corti.
- Sánchez Vilela, R. (2000). *Sueños cotidianos. Telenovela y oralidad*. Taurus.
- Sánchez Vilela, R. (2016). Transformaciones en las representaciones de género en la ficción televisiva: desnaturalización y naturalización de identidades. In *Memorias del XIII Congreso Latinoamericano de Investigadores de la Comunicación ALAIC* (pp. 61-67). ALAIC, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.
- Semilla Durán, M. (Ed.). (2013). *Variaciones sobre el Melodrama*. Ed. Casa de Cartón.
- Thomasseau, J. M. (1990). *El melodrama*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Todorov, T. (1996). *Los géneros del discurso*. Monte Ávila Editores.
- Williams, L. (2018). World and Time: Serial Television Melodrama in America. In C. Gledhill & L. Williams (Eds.), *Melodrama Unbound. Across History, Media and National Cultures* (pp. 169-184). Columbia University Press.