

Photonovels in Latin America: just a tool for social conformity?*

(or: Cultural Practices/Critical Theories: discursive repertoires, strategies and competencies?)

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RESUMO

No artigo, a autora expõe as relações de poder e representações de papéis sexuais na mídia fotonovela. Suas conclusões, nas quais aponta a fotonovela como instrumento mantenedor de ideologias dominantes, são baseadas não somente na análise textual, mas também no contexto histórico e social da América Latina.

ABSTRACT

In her article, Cacilda M. Rêgo exposes the power relations and gender representations in the media 'photonovels'. Her conclusions, in which she depicts the photonovels as a means of maintaining dominant ideologies in the society, are based not only textual analyses, but on historical and social Latin American contexts.

* Presented at the conference on "Translating Latin America: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Culture as Text" April 19-21, 1990.

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Mass media studies have evolved and changed since they were first embraced by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and, later, by "the doyen and leading luminary" of mainstream North American behavioral science, Paul Lazarsfeld.¹ Contrary to the mainstream North American tradition, which approached the question of media effects in an empirical, behavioral, and scientific fashion, the European tradition centered its analysis around the commodity form of mass media artifacts. Its predictions sounded, nevertheless, as a sad prophecy: tied to the ideological purposes of capitalism, cultural industries could not produce art but rubbish. They were powerful agents of mass deception. Therefore, audiences were passive consumers of a kind of "entertainment" which made no demand upon them.² Influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Marxist-oriented critics did not take an entirely different route. Rather, they became increasingly hostile towards cultural industries, regarding them as mere containers of the dominant ideology. Granted this, they also considered the audiences passive recipients of whatever cultural industries decided to produce and distribute.³

For a few years now, however, Marxist-oriented critics have "rediscovered" ideology via Gramsci's concept of hegemony.⁴ This move meant a radical departure from the notion of ideology as "false consciousness," and what followed was the notion of ideology as a set of social and material practices mediated, in turn, by discursive practices.⁵ Critics, thus, begun to rethink some of the old assumptions about cultural industries. Mass media artifacts (or "texts") were no longer to be considered in isolation from the historical conditions of their production and consumption. Rather, they were to be inserted into a context of "discourses in struggle".⁶ The struggle over ideology in language (language conceived here as a system of signs and representations, arranged by codes and articulated through various discourses) has constituted what Stuart Hall termed "maps of meaning."⁷

The "politics of signification" (or "politics of textuality") centered, thus, around the question of meaning. The notion of polysemic texts -- as sources of social meanings and cultural forms -- opened a wide range of questions about mass media artifacts. But, as the term "politics of signification" suggests, the question of meaning is not without conflicts. In fact, the eclectic body of theories and methods produced in recent years attests to their often incompatibility, dividing academia in at least two main traditions, i.e., cultural and critical studies.⁸ Particularly problematic is the question of privileging either the text or the audience as the main producer of meaning.

From the "cultural" side of the debate, for example, Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch argue that television texts present a multiplicity of meaning rather than a monolithic dominant point of view (pp. 61-62).⁹ The concept of television as a "cultural forum" implies that "television does not present firm ideological conclusions" but rather "comments on ideological problems."¹⁰ Though bounded or limited by their internal narrative structures (genres, for example), texts are thus considered relatively open to different interpretations. In fact, in its quasi-unlimited semiotics, the concept of television as a "cultural forum" produces a surplusvalue of meanings which enables the audiences to get more out of television texts than that the author(s) intended to produce. Although the concept of television as a "cultural forum" allows for different,

often contradictory readings of the texts multiplicity of meanings, it still privileges the texts a great deal. By doing so, it leaves a large part of the very crucial and complex conditions under which the audiences receive and respond to (i.e. interpret) particular television texts.

From the "critical" side of the debate, Hall has argued that the meanings produced by a text are always "worked on" by audiences as they make their own interpretations of particular representations.¹¹ The concept of "preferred readings" suggests that texts do privilege or prefer a certain reading, in part by inscribing certain preferred discursive positions from which its dominant discourse appears natural and, thus, credible. The polysemic nature of the text is established by the encoding/decoding circuit which makes it possible for the discourse to become an "arena of struggle." That is to say, the process of decoding is not universal. Therefore, textual meanings must be thought of as deriving not from the text itself but from the text and the socially situated reader or as Fiske puts it: reading a medium text "is a process of negotiation between this existing subject position and the one proposed by the text itself, and in this negotiation the balance of power lies with the reader."¹²

From the outset, thus, there seems to have a tacit agreement between cultural and critical studies about textual meanings preceding those produced by the audiences in their socially and culturally constructed positions. Nevertheless, once agreed upon that the audiences are constituted by a complex cultural history, critical and cultural studies do not necessarily agree on the nature of mass media texts. In cultural studies, the text is always polymorphic and its quasi-unlimited semiotics produces the "cultural forum" or "multiplicity of meanings" rather than a monolithic point of view. Thus, a television text, for example, "does not present firm ideological conclusions" but rather "comments on ideological problems." In the "preferred reading" theory, mass media texts do present hegemonic or "preferred" meanings which are negotiated, accepted, or opposed by the audiences. Thus, these texts provide a less polysemic form around their "preferred" meanings. Yet, a John Fiske reminds us, "the preferred reading theory still grants precedence to the text, though it allows the viewer considerable scope to negotiate with or oppose it according to his or her position in the social formation."¹³

According to Frank Tomasulo, textual structuralists "whether they believe a text provides a unified, monophonic meaning or a disunified, polysemic one -- all assume that it is the text (or the author) that does the meaning. All avoid the more radical conclusion that texts... in and of themselves, do not provide or determine any particular meaning. Spectators, like it or not, use (mass-mediated) texts to make meaning, and meanings differ according to the disparate strategies of different viewers."¹⁴ He further argues that there is a critical distinction between the "subject of text" (or "spectator-in-the-text") position and the "social subject" (or "real subject/text-in-the-spectator") position. They seem to be opposing, unbridgeable positions, in the words of Paul Willemen, "real readers are subjects in history, living in social formation, rather than mere subjects of a single text. The two types of subject are not commensurate."¹⁵

Thus, if inquiry over production and consumption of meaning in contemporary mass-mediated cultures has required media critics to revise old notions regarding texts and audiences alike, emphasis on the text (i.e., how a text

determines meaning through its polysemic, open nature) has produced what Tomasulo identified as the "spectator-in-the-text" position, that is to say, the spectator is "sub-jected to" the text in the Foucaultian sense. This formulation is important here for, either overtly or implicitly, the term "subject" (and thus, subjectivity) has gained a privileged position in the debate around signification (or "meaning").

In political discourses, the "subject" signifies a person who is subjected to a particular form of rule or domination.¹⁶ According to Michel Foucault, for example, the word "subject" has two meanings "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings, [however], suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to."¹⁷ The "subject" implied/implicated by Foucault is brought to light in media studies by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, who argue that "theories defined the viewer -- the 'subject' -- as positioned by the text, not only because its discourse refers to what he [or she] already knows as real but more so because it makes him or her an accomplice in the point of view of the narrative discourse [i.e., "sub-jected to" it], which is the only perspective from which the discourse makes sense."¹⁸

For present purposes it suffices to say that the insistence that texts are not made by "subjects" (agents) but, instead, "subjects" are made by texts, has proved to be quite problematic: for example, one cannot assume that a particular meaning is intrinsic to a given text, since it must depend on how it is read. Thus, one must avoid making the mass-mediated text the only basis for critical analysis for, as Michèle Barrett correctly argues, "to restrict our analysis solely to the text itself is to turn the object of analysis into its own means of explanation; by definition this cannot provide an adequate account."¹⁹

In rejecting the notion that texts speak for themselves, feminist critics have contributed to the debate moving it thus to a new arena. Claire Johnston, for example, has called for "a move away from a notion of the text as an autonomous object of study and towards the more complex question of subjectivity seen in historical/social terms."²⁰ Endorsing this view, Tonny Bennett and Janet Woolcott suggest that "it is necessary to abandon the assumption that texts, in themselves, constitute the place where the business of culture is conducted, or that they can be constructed as the sources of meanings or effects which can be decided from an analysis of their formal properties."²¹

This shift is significant to mass media studies: textual analysis, once considered unproblematic and easily explained by empirical evidence, has become a contested terrain. Thus, the notion of the "text-in-the-spectator," i.e., no longer "sub-jected to" "the power of mass media texts to produce meanings, has opposed the "spectator-in-the-text" position. The shift from "texts" to "subjects" grants that the latter "can rewrite or reread even the most dominating of textual interpretations, according to their own racial, sexual, psychological, or class disposition."²² Therefore, inquiry no longer emphasizes the power of the texts but accords precedence to the discursive practices of the audiences over those of the texts. The strength of this argument, however, may be its weakness: "instead of passive audience of the old-fashioned positivist and Marxist theories, it gives us the essentially passive text."²³ That is to say, "the text is an open potential that can only be activated into a meaningful and pleasurable

moment by the personified semiotic process: in this process, the meanings and pleasures that are eventually produced are determined by the social allegiances of the person engaged in it, not by any preferential or possessive activity of the text itself.²⁴ But, as Robert Deming reminds us, "fetishism of the subject would be as odious as fetishism of the pleasures of the text."²⁵

Photonovels:

One cannot deny that feminist theories have opened up new ways for understanding cultural industries and thus, radically altering the terrain of cultural and critical studies. Together they have spoken to a number of important concerns in both areas of research such as, critical analysis of power relations and gender representations in the media, and how ideology and economics play a great role in creating and maintaining existing social practices within the cultural industries. Nevertheless, only a few analyses of Latin American photonovels [*fotonovelas*] attempt to challenge the concept of "passive female audience" or question how the dominant modes of representation (i.e. discourse) --which by their very nature, reinforce and confirm existing ideologies-- can also be opposed, transformed, or subverted. Showing in convincing detail that women are usually depicted as subordinate to men and passive-dependent, some photonovel analyses have concluded little more than the obvious: that mass media messages, especially the ones addressed to female audiences, are instrumental in perpetuating subordination²⁶. As Michèle Mattelart points out:

Oddly enough, there are a great many studies of media power structures, national and international, and a great many too of the content of media messages, but very few on the manner in which the 'dominate' groups and individuals read and respond to them, or oppose to them a specific manner of, precisely, **appropriation**, and resist them... in the name of some project of their own.²⁷

In the same way, Muriel Cantor argues that there has been no controversy among those who study popular culture that women enjoy reading fictional texts. There has also been little controversy that those texts embody traditional, patriarchal values. In fact, the emphasis on sex and sexual relationships through the years reveals that the patriarchal culture dominates popular women's literature. Influenced by the Frankfurt School, some mass media critics claim that those who read this type of fiction adopt a world view that contributes to their own subordination.²⁸

Nevertheless, the assumption that Latin American photonovels are instruments of capitalism to silence most women has not taken mass media critics too far. It is no secret that the ideological function of the photonovel narratives rests precisely in the fact that they are given as "natural" representations of women and men's reality (representations are here narrowly defined as "depictions" of male and female relationships in a given social set). Yet, to simply identify and document the narrow range of depictions, and

assume they reinforce stereotypes in the minds of individual audience members, be that male or female, is to neglect (1) the elements of protest and resistance contained within mass media, and that (2) ideologies are not simply imposed on the people. They are effective unless they achieve resonance with people's experience, i.e., by responding to changes in people's lives and social conditions. Therefore, if it can be demonstrated that the patriarchal surface of photonovel texts conceals a womanly subtext and that "female audiences are capable of interpreting these forms against the grain... we might... be able to understand how often and how extensively women have managed to resist dominant practices of patriarchal signification".²⁹

This is important to us here because much of the work of criticism undertaken so far on photonovels has concentrated disproportionately on describing *how* power/gender relations are (re)presented ("what images of women are portrayed?" is the commonest question) without seeking to locate these representations within a broader historical framework. But this is far more difficult than it might first appear. As the history of critical theories show us, criticism is rooted in the struggle for a "correct" reading. This point is crucial to this paper and will be explored again later. I shall look first, however, at the question of "textuality" in photonovel analyses.

Women's fiction has been defined as "fiction written for women, usually with women as central characters".³⁰ J. Bernard makes a distinction between "female culture" and the "culture of the female world". According to her, a large part of the "culture of the female world" includes products created by men, so that much of the cultural diet consumed by women does portray them as they look to men, in a male context, and in situations of interest to men. In contrast, "female culture" refers to the products which are created by and for women themselves. Yet, it is difficult at times to make such a distinction, especially when analyzing women's fiction: though often written by women for women it is financed, produced, and distributed by industries predominantly under the control of men.³¹ Granted that photonovels belong to the realm of the "culture of the female world", for they are published by men for women, Angela Habert points out that "the production of the myth is separated from the consumers of the myth not only by social class but by gender".³²

Created in Italy after World War II, photonovels spread throughout Europe and Latin America. In the latter, they became widely read by working-class women in urban areas, especially those who enter domestic service.³³ In fact, no other form of print media has approached their level of distribution and readership. According to Cornelia Flora, this is not only true when one looks at the number of copies sold, but particularly dramatic when one considers the degree to which each number is reread and recycled through informal lending and rental arrangements in poor neighborhoods throughout individual countries.³⁴

Textual analyses of photonovels reveal that:

The plot generally revolves round the ups and downs of a love affair which brings together people separated by social (or age, or previous ties, or a combination of all three). The family context tends to be riddled haphazardly with social pathology and individual

problems -- unhappy homes, incurable diseases, illegitimate children, Alcoholism, incestuous or quasi-incestuous cohabitation. The variations run the whole gamut from romantic adventures to social dramas. In Latin America, the serials are very much marked by the sex and violence, obsessively present... in the form of blackmail or rape. The unrolling of the story through all kinds of ambiguities, avowals, mistaken identities and interventions by a *deus ex machina* reveals a highly normative message: the good and the virtuous are rewarded. Love sanctioned by the legitimate union of marriage is better than passion, which is always punished by fate. The female characters ennoble the values of purity and virginity for girls, and often become heroic martyrs to men who in fact get away with abusing their masculine authority and class power; but, after putting her through great suffering and temptation, they confirm the happiness of the girl from a modest background by offering her a ring and a married life. The sacrifice, courage, and self-denial of wives and mothers are those attitudes reinforced by these messages, crowned as they are by the return of the husband, the renewed gratitude of the son, or the simple satisfaction that comes from doing one's duty.³⁵

Furthermore:

[Photonovel content] invalidates any form of struggle against social inequalities (the existence of which is admitted) by means of this diffuse explanation: only love can cross class barriers. Not only is the solution individual -- never collective -- it is also linked to the miracle of love. Love comes to be a universal explanation which can resolve social contradictions through denying them, for the order of society, like love, is founded on Fate. The repressive order of the heart has two helpmates: Nature and Fate.³⁶

Mass media critics have not been more successful at analyzing photonovel content. Flora argues that regardless of class, the heroine in Latin America tends to be either proud or arrogant -- "to be put in her place by the strong male to appreciate her and change his way".³⁷ Elsewhere, Flora further argues that photonovels "reinforce passivity as a desirable characteristic among those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, legitimizing oppression by ritualizing it in print. ...Despite a recognition of shared misery, solutions -- or their possibility -- are still a product of fate and the individual."³⁸ Photonovels do not call for change, nor point to ways one could carry it out. Rather, "it further mystifies reality by

putting into words and pictures the emotions and experiences of the vast majority of urban dwellers in Latin America today."³⁹

Acknowledging the influence of Flora's research upon their own, Jane Hill and Carole Brown argue that photonovels seem to reinforce the stereotype of the heroine as Mary. "Passive, self-abnegating role performances by heroines were rewarded, usually by the successful conclusion of a love affair with a wealthy man, while self-assertion and activity were punished and associated with evil characters."⁴⁰

In the same vein, Habert argues that photonovels are especially pernicious for the lower social strata in Brazil "because they lend a false air of reality to the 'lessons' being taught."⁴¹ Further, the problem of social division has been excluded from Brazilian photonovels. Neither language nor setting are differentiated by social class indicators. Thus, "love made everyone equal. That equality is white, middle class and European."⁴² Not surprisingly,

problems are individual, as are solutions. While laziness is castigated, so is direct seeking of wealth and any rebellion against one's economic situation. Instead, the *fotonovelas* stress that happiness is found only at the individual level of the feelings. Class concern for material things interferes with seeking mutual sentimental gratification -- although of course the opportunity to purchase the right material things will occur once that sentimental soul mate is encountered and won.⁴³

Ironically, it is Flora who says: "Habert attempts to analyze the deep meanings of the *fotonovelas* and draw their impact on the readers. This type of analysis, however, assumes a totally passive reader, easily manipulated and led -- in contrast, presumably, to the wiser intellectual who can distinguish such attempts."⁴⁴ Furthermore, "relying on content alone forces Habert into suppositions about interpretations by readers and the impact of an empirically unverified interpretation that has no empirical verification. Thus, she sees the *fotonovelas* in Brazil as an inoculation for conformity that helps fit diverse individuals into the needs of an urban industrial society."⁴⁵ These are strange words indeed, coming from someone who analyzes the ideological content of photonovel narratives just as Habert does!

In one of her most recent works, Flora argues that Mexican photonovels have gone far beyond the initial *fotonovela rosa* (pink photonovel) of "a totally escapist character to deal with issues that are viewed as real by the public."⁴⁶ Furthermore, "no longer does the virtuous young heroine win over the rich but cynical older hero by her naive passivity. Both male and female can be active, and the problems presented, from rape to incest, have tragic endings as often as happy ones."⁴⁷ This recent shift, however, still attributes to photonovels the role of "purveyors of popular morality." According to Flora, although the moral code has shifted over in Mexican photonovels, a didactic morality is still explicit in them. Near - pornographic photographs juxtapose "captions of instructive morality!"⁴⁸

The Mexican photonovels, once confined to the borders of Mexico, have attested their popularity in the United States. Mariclaire Acosta suggests that Mexican photonovels appeal to working class women because they reinforce and reaffirm long accepted sexual morals. Thus, they serve "as convenient mechanism to establish and maintain a common set of norms and values among a large segment of Hispanic women" in the United States.⁴⁹ Furthermore, photonovels "offer an escape into both a cultural and linguistic milieu that is familiar and reassuring and into a fantasy world that provides the reader with vicarious sexual titillation and the opportunity to imagine what it is like to live in the world of the young, rich and successful."⁵⁰

Although textual analyses tend to go hand in hand with quantitative analyses in most studies of Latin American photonovels, little is known about their readers. According to Flora, since photonovels depend on sales alone, and not advertising, for profit, there is no pressure on the publishers to know their readers. She points out that when an Argentine company attempted a market study with a standard survey research company in Bogota, they discover that "no one read *fotonovelas* -- a surprising finding when over ten million comics and *fotonovelas* are printed each year in Colombia, and when most *fotonovelas* are read by a vast array of family members, neighbors, and schoolmates, as well as rented out in lending library fashion in the poorer neighborhoods of all Colombian cities."⁵¹ Flora found, however, that "few people, even regular readers, would admit to this 'vice' without much probing. Colombians know what they should read, and this is what they dutifully report."⁵²

In another attempt at surveying photonovel readers, Flora did a content analysis of a random sample of two hundred letters which arrived at Editorial Cinco in Colombia, and interviewed selected readers in depth. She concluded then that photonovel reading is a group function. In her words:

Groups of friends will get together with a pile of *fotonovela* and read them as they trade back and forth. A social invitation may consist of 'Come over and read *fotonovelas*'. Like watching television, little occurs for most readers. But doing it together creates an non-verbal sharing of a series of important values, especially those relating to interpersonal relationships, the relative importance of romantic versus other problems, and the method through which problem solution is achieved. Thus writing to *fotonovelas* can be seen as continuation of the social process of *fotonovela* reading.⁵³

Furthermore:

The sweet young girl conquering the heart of the jaded older man, usually her boss, seems to be the ideal pattern according to those who write letters, bearing out the *fotonovela* tendency for young girls to mate with older men. While the Cinderella story of the 1960s...

no longer exists, there is still the strong message of unequal man-woman relationship, with the man approaching the romance with considerably more resources than the woman.⁵⁴

As a way of concluding, Flora points out that both male and female, liked best male characters who were the "wholesome, serious, sportloving types" presented in the Colombian photonovels. She, nevertheless, observed some "contradictions": while admiring the "simple and serious characters" of the Colombian photonovels, readers also liked the latent violence of the male fighting physically for the female, more likely to be present in the Mexican photonovels.⁵⁵ Flora's account of photonovels readership derives from both textual and quantitative analyses and -- although she claims otherwise -- assumes the audience to be a homogeneous one.

Although acknowledging that one recent important strand in the theories of media studies has meant a rejection of the "inevitably passive" way in which people react to the messages addressed at them, Mattelart herself was not able to promote anything but the traditional Marxist view of the Frankfurt School that the mass media merely reflect the dominant economic ideology. In her words, "radio and television programming is particularly revealing in this respect: it punctuates the day with moments that make women's condition 'all worth while', and helps to compensate for being shut up at home all day. It makes women's work legitimate, not as work, but as a duty that forms part of their natural function".⁵⁶

Furthermore, "the greatest of the repressions" carried out by what she has called "the order of the heart" in melodramatic discourses is that by representing and explaining reality, it reproduces "the conditions of production of the social system, predisposing women to accept the 'natural' explanation of their domination".⁵⁷ Mass media texts are thus, "the places where the feelings and ideas of the 'silent majority' are confirmed, where accepted wisdom on the hierarchy of roles and values is reiterated and rearranged in such a way as to reinforce the beliefs and practices of the greatest number".⁵⁸ Mattelart's analysis not only implies that mass media inevitably serve the interests of the dominant ideology but also, reduces the complexity of relations between men and women (as textual representations and as historical subjects) to "psychological, biological, and sexual differences".⁵⁹

Furthermore, if Mattelart's study of the Popular Unity regime in Chile led her to conclude the melodramatic messages "were not necessarily read as their senders intended, and that the way in which they were received denied their internal logic, leading to a roundabout process of consumption", she, nevertheless, found disturbing that melodramatic stories "provide pleasure for women viewers who are critically aware of how alienating they are and who have located the mechanisms through which their work is carried on".⁶⁰

Mass media critics (or even feminists themselves!) do not often agree on the question of the "pleasure of the text". Though not referring to photonovels in particular, Rosalind Coward argues that "our desire as women is one of the primary mechanisms by which consent for a particular way of living is constantly sought and frequently achieved. ...Pleasure is western society's permanent

special offer for women... in the kitchen, on the streets, in the world of fashion, in films, in fiction."(p.26)⁶¹

Against the view of a "natural" female pleasure, Fiske argues that pleasure requires a sense of control over meanings and an active participation in the cultural process. Thus, pleasure results from a particular relationship between meanings and power. For the subordinate, pleasure "is produced by the assertion of one's social identity in resistance to, in independence of, or in negation with, the structure of domination. ...Pleasure results from the production of meanings of the world and of self that are felt to serve the interests of the reader rather than those of the dominant."⁶²

Conclusion:

Despite the generous diversity in methods theories, mass-mediated texts, as well as their audiences, are still nebulous objects of study. This is so, perhaps, because both texts and audiences are quite complex in themselves and, as criticism of empirical studies has demonstrated, neither one can be simply narrowed down to precise or manageable divisions or subdivisions which, if at all attainable, would be of little significance anyhow. Related to this also the inadequacy of textual analysis. As I attempted to illustrate above, content analyses of photonoels pose a problem also shared by most traditional textual analyses (semiotics, for example) within the so-called cultural and critical studies, i.e., a tendency to "produce an authoritarian, even 'correct', reading of a text," while tending to "ascribe to the text the power to impose this reading on the viewer."⁶³

Speaking of "academic politics," Fiske has argued that "the helpless duped audience can, because of its subjugation, be legitimately spoken for, explained, and theorized by academics who are themselves immune from the forces they find acting upon others. The audience becomes the 'other,' and academia grants itself the poser to explain and to evacuate itself from the process of explanation."⁶⁴ In addition, there is something "profoundly undemocratic about a theory, however politically correct, that tells the people (seen as the other) that we can understand and articulate their plight in patriarchal capitalism."⁶⁵ This point is also brought by Liebes and Katz who argue that "critical researchers have been living for a long time with at least two different sets of decoding: the hegemonic codes, which they assign to readers and the oppositional ones, which they assign to themselves when pointing to the latent or conspiratorial message implicit in the text. It [has taken] a long time for [mass media critics] to feel uncomfortable over this elitist dissonance."⁶⁶

In fact, textual analyses por se let us know very little about the concrete reading practices of audience and the ways in which mass media texts -- not to mention their interpretations -- are constituted within the context of their consumption. In rejecting this approach, Fiske argues that textual analyses have to pay less attention to the textual strategies of preference "and more to the gaps and spaces that open [the media] up to meanings not preferred by textual structure, but that result from the social experience for the reader."⁶⁷ Thus, "the study of culture must not be confined to the readings of texts, for the conditions of a text's reception necessarily become part of the meanings and pleasures it offers the viewer."⁶⁸ It would not be unfair to say that, although

textual analyses can give us some information about power/gender representations, they have got to answer questions such as for example, (1) how are gendered readings of photonovels related to the construction of social reality and, (2) how do textual conventions place both men and women in particular positions of meaning.

It is not surprising, therefore, that textual analyses have been under fire for some time now. Pointing out that most media studies are based on them, H. Leslie Steeves, for example, argues that these studies do not elaborate theoretically on what is meant by stereotypes. Rather, they simply classify character traits which are assumed to reinforce overgeneralizations in the minds of individual audience members.⁶⁹ Thus, while male characters are the kind of "wholesome, serious, sportloving types", female characters are "erotic objects", "voracious devourers of men", "virginal girlfriends", "chaste faithful wives", "saintly mothers", "meddling mothers-in-law" and so forth.

The emphasis on character traits (or "stereotypes") has tended to produce a criticism which is bound to the terms of mass media texts themselves. In short, little is outside of these texts worth of being scrutinized or questioned in depth. One might then say, once the "excesses" of power/gender representations are outlined, and the dominant ideologies at work unmasked, what follows is not necessarily what remained outside of given textual narratives. Textual analyses, thus, tend to be imprisoned inside the walls of the master's house (dominant ideologies contained in the texts), so to speak. For this reason, it can also be said, the construction of power/gender representations in textual narratives might also be affected by its deconstruction. That is, in attempting to explain ideological (mis) representations as accepted and absorbed by particular individuals as their own (a process defined by Louis Althusser as "interpellation"),⁷⁰ institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical theories (feminist or otherwise) do not challenge the dominant ideologies they claim to contest. Rather, they tend to retextualize dominant ideologies in disguised forms (for example, textual analyses hold the assumption that "meaning" - or "truth" - of any given text precedes any other "meaning" outside of it. "Meaning" is thus guaranteed by gifted "decoding" strategies and competencies beared upon by media critics themselves). Perhaps, as much as photonovels themselves, textual analyses have tended to celebrate a kind of discourse which tends to naturalize normative valuations. Inquiry of how mass media critics "sub-jected to" mass-mediated texts ("critics-in-the text" position) sounds a fascinating task!

Furthermore, granted that a text's meaning is not fixed once and for all, because it is determined by the situation of the interpreters as well as that of the text, one can argue that textual meanings vary in time and change with each distinct configuration of production and consumption contexts. Furthermore, interpretations of particular texts are themselves mediated by other texts, discursive practices, and social relations. As pointed out by Lawrence Grossberg and Paula Treichler, "the public nature and extent of media communication have made obvious the uncertainty of its effects and hence the productivity of consumption itself. [Thus], the audience cannot be conceptualized as a passive receptacle, constantly being commodified and reprogrammed."⁷¹ Put another way: although it is still not known what audiences who read photonovels actually make of them, and whether photonovels in any way question or reinforce

patriarchal values, the nature of the audience and the way it "reads" cultural products cannot be taken for granted.

To the extent that textual reading - be that of photonovels, romance, or soap operas - is a social/ideological practice, one can argue that it can promote and/or oppose the dominant ideologies of any given mass medium. For some time now thus, critical and cultural studies have had to accept the lack of guarantees, the gaps that exist between the text and either its intended or actual interpretations and effects. Mass media theories, therefore, have had "to seek out models which can account for the determining and determined activity of texts, audiences, and [historical] contexts. In the effort to find more refined tools for concrete, local readings, [these theories have] had to displace the notion of static, preconstituted codes in favor of more flexible notions of transcoding in which members of the audience, always located within historically specific relations, struggle to appropriate the possibilities of the text into their own lives."⁷² Audiences, thus, never exist outside of such struggles and never escape being determined and reshaped by them. Neither do critics for that matter!

As to textual analyses, which expose dominant readings in Latin American television (soap operas) and women's magazines (including photonovels), they indicate little change over time in the so-called "image of women" in the media. These analyses, although speaking to a number of important concerns related to power relations and gender representations in the media, do not attempt to challenge the concept of a "passive female audience" or question how the dominant modes of representations - which by their very nature reinforce and confirm existing ideologies - can also be opposed, transformed, or radically subverted.

If mass media critics are to fruitfully explore power relations and gender representation in the media, they do need, however, to go beyond textual analysis to a more acute examination of the relationship between textual details and historical contexts. Maybe, then, they can encourage a much needed change in current photonovels analyses and seek spaces of struggle whereby more positive readings for women can be possible. In fact, to see media texts as solely perpetrators of subordination is to overestimate the power of these texts and to undermine the role of the "reader" (as subject in history, i.e., subjected to social and material experiences) in the construction of meaning. It is important that media critics continue to explore the mechanisms through which both textual and social experiences work together to evade, transform, or oppose dominant ideologies in today's mass media(ed) societies.

Notes

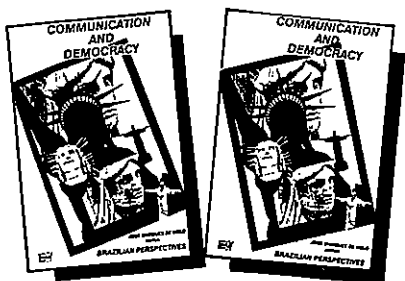
1. See: Michael Schudson, "The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 4 (1987): 51-68.
2. See: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).
3. See, for example: Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *para leer el pato Donald* (24th ed.) (Mexico City: siglo veintiuno editores, 1983); and Ariel Dorfman, *The Empire's Old Clothes* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

4. See: Stuart Hall, "The rediscovery of 'ideology': return of the repressed in media studies, in **Culture, Society and the Media**, ed. Michael Gurevitch et al. (London: Methuen, 1982), 56-90.
5. See: Lawrence Grossberg, "Strategies of Marxist cultural interpretations," **Critical Studies in Mass Communication**, 1 (1984)392-421.
6. See: David Morley, "Texts, readers, subjects," in **Culture, Media, Language**, ed. Stuart Hall et al (London: Hutchinson/Centre for Contemporary Studies, 1986), 163-173.
7. See: Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'," in **Mass Communication and Society**, ed. James Curran et al (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979), 315-348.
8. See: David J. Sholle, "Critical Studies: From the Theory of Ideology to Power/Knowledge," **Critical Studies in Mass Communication**, 5 (1988): 16-41.
9. Horace M. Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as Cultural forum," in **Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives** (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 61-62.
10. Ibid., 64.
11. See: Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in **Culture, media & language: Working, papers in cultural studies, 1972-1979**, ed. Stuart Hall et al (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 128-138.
12. John Fiske, **Television Culture** (New York: Methuen, 1987), 65-66.
13. John Fiske, "Meaningful Moments," **Critical Studies in Mass Communication**, 5 (1988): 247.
14. Frank P. Tomasulo, "The Text-In-The-Spectator: The Role of Phenomenology In An Eclectic Theoretical Methodology," **Journal of Film and Video**, 5 (Spring 1988):29.
15. Cited in: Morley, 169.
16. The use of the word "subject" has been extended to include one who is subject to ideology [or subject-in-ideology as claimed by Althusser, to particular hegemonic formations, or to power in general. Within psychoanalysis the word refers to the complex of psychical formations which are constituted as the human being is positioned in relation to language. See: Paul Smith, **Discerning the Subject** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
17. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in **Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics**, ed. H. Dreyfuss and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 212.
18. Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, "On the Convergence of Theories of Mass Communication and Literature Regarding the Role of the 'Reader'" (typewritten manuscript, n.d.), 6.
19. Michèle Barrett, "Ideology and the Production of Gender," in **Feminist Criticism and Social Change**, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), 75.
20. Cited in: Morley, 169-170.
21. Tonny Bennett and Janet Woolcott, **Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero** (New York: Methuen, 1987), 6, 59.
22. Tomasulo, 29.
23. Fiske, 248.
24. Ibid.

25. Robert H. Deming, "The Television Spectator - Subject," *Journal of Film and Video* 37(1985):60.
26. Though they by no means account for all, or even nearly all, it is fair to say, however, that feminist media scholars have begun to challenge the concept of a "passive female audience" by taking into consideration the moments of protest and opposition within mainstream popular culture. See, for example: Angela McRobbie, "Settling accounts with subcultures: a feminist critique, in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, ed. Tonny Bennett et al. (London: The Open University Press, 1985):111-127; Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbane, 111.: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
27. Michèle Mattelart, *Women, Media, Crisis: Femininity and Disorder* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1986), 14.
28. Muriel G. Cantor, "Popular Culture and the Portrayal of Women: Content and Control," in *Analyzing Gender*, ed. Beth B. Hess and Myra M. Ferree (Newbury Park, Ca: Sage, 1987), 209.
29. Janice A. Radway, "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytical Method, and Political Practice," *Communication*, 9 (1986):98.
30. Cantor, 191.
31. Cited in: *Ibid.*, 206-207.
32. Cited in: Cornelia B. Flora, "The Fotonovela in Brazil: The First Stage," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 3(1984):184.
33. According to Flora, photonovel publishers in several Latin American countries acknowledge that maids constitute one of their major readership categories. Though they speak with derision, they aim their content at the type of women they imagine maids to be. Flora argues, thus, that *fotonovela* content presents an excellent way of monitoring the images of domestic service that enter the popular consciousness. See: Cornelia B. Flora, "Maids In The Mexican Photonovel," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 4(1985): 84-94.
34. Flora, "The Fotonovela in Brazil," 184.
35. Mattelart, 12-13.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
37. Cornelia B. Flora, "The Passive Female and Social Change: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Women's Magazine Fiction," in *Female and Male in Latin America: Essays*, ed. Ann Pescatello (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1974), 69.
38. Cornelia B. Flora, "Fotonovelas: Message Creation and Reception," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14(Winter 1980): 524.
39. *Ibid.*, 525.
40. Jane H. Hill and Carole Browner, "Gender Ambiguity and Class Stereotyping in the Mexican Fotonovela," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 1(1982):44.
41. Cited in: Flora, "The Fotonovela in Brazil," 187.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, 185.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*

46. Flora, "Maids in The Mexican Photonovel," 63.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Cited in: Loretta Carrillo and Thomas A. Lyson, "The Fotonovela as a Cultural Bridge for Hispanic Women in the United States," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 17 (Winter 1983):59.
50. Ibid.
51. Flora, "Fotonovelas," 529.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 530.
54. Ibid., 531.
55. Ibid., 533.
56. Mattelart, 8
57. Ibid., 14.
58. Ibid., 23-24.
59. Ibid., 18.
60. Ibid., 15.
61. Rosalind Coward, "Female Desire and Sexual Identity," in Vol. 1 of **Women, Feminist Identity and society in the 1980's Selected Papers**, ed. Myriam Díaz - Diocaretz and Iris M. Zavala (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1985), 26.
62. Fiske, **Television Culture**, 19.
63. Ibid., 45.
64. Fiske, "Meaningful Moments," 246.
65. Ibid., 250.
66. Liebers and Katz, 4.
67. Fiske, **Television Culture**, 64.
68. Ibid., 72.
69. H. Leslie Steeves, "Feminist Theories and Media Studies," **Critical Studies in Mass Communication**, 4 (June 1987):102.
70. See: Louis Althusser, **Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays**, tr. B. Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).
71. Lawrence Grossberg and Paula A. Treichler, "Intersections of power: Criticism, television, gender," **Communication**, 9 (1987):278.
72. Ibid., 276-277.

COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRACY - BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVES



Trata-se de uma coletânea composta pelos trabalhos de pesquisadores da ECA/USP apresentados na programação científica da International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR) Scientific Conference, realizada em Bled, Iugoslávia, em 1990. A publicação registra as tendências das pesquisas em comunicação e o desempenho dos "mass-media" em várias subáreas, tanto a nível do Brasil quanto da América Latina. Divulga os aspectos relativos ao processo de democratização e transformações nos sistemas de comunicação de massa em vigência, analisando as perspectivas da tecnologia da comunicação com os seus sistemas alternativos de informação e de cultura, em especial o desenvolvimento da comunicação eletrônica. *Communication and Democracy* tem por objetivo estimular o intercâmbio internacional e motivar o meio acadêmico a multiplicar a interface com outros pesquisadores interessados nos mesmos objetos de estudo.

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