

Article

Television in Latin America Is “Everywhere”: Not Dead, Not Dying, but Converging and Thriving

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Abstract

In Latin America, the now-venerable expression “the end of television” itself looks old, tired, and flawed: markets, cultures, politics, and policies alike find television more alive than ever, albeit in its usual state of technological, institutional, and textual flux. Advertising investment in TV continues to increase, governments still use television to promote generalized propaganda as well as their daily agendas, football on screen remains wildly popular, and fiction programs, most notably *telenovelas*, dominate prime time and draw large audiences aged between 25 and 60. While younger viewers watch television on a wider variety of screens and technologies, and do so at differing times, the discourse of TV remains an important referent in their audiovisual experiences. In addition, across age groups, divides persist between a minority with routine high-quality access to the digital world of technology and information and a majority without alternatives to the traditional audiovisual sphere, for whom cell phones, for instance, are at most devices for communicating with friends and family members. We cannot predict the future of TV in Latin America—but we can say with confidence that the claims for its demise are overstated. Television remains the principal cultural game in town.

Keywords

mestizaje; realismo mágico; televisión; televisual

Issue

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1. Introduction

Latin America is both the most and least postcolonial region in the world. It is the most postcolonial because it held that status prior to most of Asia and Africa. And it is the least postcolonial, because it remains dominated by the two languages of its former masters and is interdependent with the “other” America. As the former dictator/modernizer, Porfirio Díaz put it, “Pobre de

México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos” [“Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States”].¹

Contested origin myths like that one are typical of the interplay of truth claims in and about Latin America,

¹ That’s the standard *nostrum* (quoted in The Economist, 2009). Another version attributes the expression to the public intellectual and porfirista Nemesio García Naranjo (González Gamio, 2013).

where imagination, history, spirituality, and science have had rough-and-tumble interactions for centuries, and contradiction is a way of ironized life. The notion of *realismo mágico* (magical realism) is widely associated with Latin American art and literature. A complex, at least paradoxical blend of scientific observation and utopian hope, of imaginative anthropomorphism and description of the natural world, of Western Enlightenment preoccupations countered by indigenous cosmology, *realismo mágico* incarnates the coeval and coterminous spread of tradition and modernity; and as we propose here, it permeates the interchange between TV fiction and audiences. This matches the continent's official and vernacular ideologies of *mestizaje*, or mixedness.

Mestizaje stands testimony to a shared history of invasion, sexual violence, and slavery that goes back many hundreds of years. As native–American, European, and African genes merged, so too did their cultures, simultaneously forging new ways of being and sustaining more than traces of older forms. This is no blanket description of a successfully inclusive and popular multiculturalism—all sides may at times embrace and at others curse the concept. For instance, indigenous Argentines are a small minority, many African–descended peoples, notably in Brazil and Colombia, are excluded or exclude themselves from the norm and suffer extreme privation that articulates race to class, and hundreds of indigenous languages persist in everyday use by native peoples who frequently define themselves beyond *mestizaje*.

But the term is applied in everyday talk by most Latin Americans in most countries. And *realismo mágico* offers a metaphorized *mestizaje* contact story in which European and creolized elites encounter native peoples, flora, and fauna. Each leaves their mark on the other, albeit in a frequently tragic and unfulfilling way that is characterized by domination and inequality.

The dual concepts of *realismo mágico* and *mestizaje* help explain the complex history of development and modernity in countries that were imperial possessions for much longer than the rest of the modern world—and gained their independence much earlier. The Latin American experience is distinctly different both from colonized zones that remained largely intact genetically and culturally during European colonialism (say, Indonesia and India) and those that saw the overwhelming, ongoing demographic dominance of white settlers (Aotearoa and the US, for example). This also helps explain the mixture of wonderment and cynicism, of critique and embrace, that colors Latin American attitudes to “the new” and its provenance in the Global North. The continent is both of that world *and* of the Global South, both Western and not, both developed and not, as we shall see with reference to its experience of the online world.²

² Beyond market differences between blocs such as Mercosur

To examine the region, we'll traverse very varied terrain: questions of convergence; the specifically Latin American re-invention of television; what we are calling, after literature, the particular solitude of the region; and the probable future. To do so, we'll draw on research from a variety of traditions, such as ethnography, textual analysis, political economy, public policy, and media studies. And we'll start with two provocations.

First, Latin American TV draws upon, produces, and disseminates discourses of the nation, including propaganda, that help set the daily agenda for citizens. This is possible because of two factors: agreements and pacts, not always explicit, that exist between capital, state, and television impresarios in the region (Hernández & Orozco, 2007) and the fact that free TV in Latin America is almost omnipresent—akin to Coca-Cola—and like Coke, is more prevalent than potable water.

Second, television is big business. Commercial TV was long the media outlet with the biggest returns, a situation that only changed with the monumental success of Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon (Sánchez-Ruiz, 2012). But that has not spelt the end of television's dominance—rather, it marks a moment of transmutation.

2. Convergence? With the Switch to Digital, Television Bursts Out on Many Screens

In 1940s sociology and 1960s economics, convergence referred to capitalist societies becoming more centrally planned, even as state-socialist ones grew more capitalist (Galbraith, 1967). In 1980s communications, convergence explained the processes whereby people and institutions share expressions and issues (Bormann, 1985). Links can be forged today between these institutional and symbolic approaches, tying the general to the specific and applied to the media. Néstor García Canclini argues that:

“The fusion of multimedia and concentrated media ownership in cultural production correlate[s] with changes in cultural consumption. Therefore macro sociological approaches, which seek to understand the integration of radio, television, music, news, books, and the internet in the fusion of multimedia

and the Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte, and particular combinations of minorities and majority cultures within countries, most scholars specializing on Latin American cultural and sociopolitical issues use the whole continent as a reference (e.g. Sinclair, 1999; Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013; Sinclair & Wilken, 2007) as does the field of area studies (<https://lasa.international.pitt.edu/eng>). Of course, the US is a large and wealthy Spanish-language TV market, but it operates under very different regulatory regimes and patterns of ownership and control from its southern neighbors, lacks both the prevailing ideologies on which we draw, and is mostly an English-language nation.

and business, also need an anthropological gaze, a more qualitative perspective, to comprehend how modes of access, cultural goods, and forms of communication are being reorganized.” (2008, p. 390)

Prevailing sociopolitical and cultural contexts simultaneously influence and are changed by communications media. Technological innovation typically derives from prevailing “social relations and cultural forms” that condition the “selection, investment and development” of the media (Williams, 1989). Then the relationship becomes reciprocal. The latest reorganization takes a multitude of forms. It urges us not to proclaim an end to TV, but one more transmutation of a medium that has been the major audiovisual entertainment industry and source of information in the region during the last six decades.

Latin Americans watch more television than ever before. With the spread of diverse options in the region for watching TV and video in the emerging digital era, dating from about 2010, what we might call the televisual world of Latin America is expanding, not contracting, as audiences experience different screens and audiovisual possibilities. For example, the average Peruvian spends nine hours a day in front of various screens enjoying a variety of formats. In Brazil, the figure is eight hours, and seven in Mexico (Milward-Brown, 2014). That’s a third of one’s life.

Of course, quantity is not the only significant factor. In qualitative terms, viewers mix several televisual options: established genres, such as *telenovelas* and dramatic series; professional and amateur videos; sports, most notably football; and films that may be either industrial or artisanal (Smith, 2014). For research reasons, these texts are often separated by genres and platforms, but if they are to be understood holistically as contemporary audience *televidencia* (a bundle of televisual practices) it is crucial to comprehend the way people watch screens on a continuum and as a social and televisual practice, in accordance with García Canciani’s proposals. So “televisual melodrama [the world of the *telenovela* in this case] is not only a site where the tensions among the national, the local, and the global are articulated and made manifest, it is also a communicative bridge that links viewers across national, expanded regional, and global realms of transmission and reception, working to shape new cultural and intercultural communities” (Benamou, 2009, p. 152).

Televidencia has several implications for daily life in terms of activity, emotion, and the historic *compadrazgo* (the ongoing, family-like relationship) between TV and its audiences (Orozco, 2014b). Viewers derive a variety of messages and norms from TV about paternal and pedagogic roles in ways that affect everything from the organization of daily domesticity to behavior in school.

Televidencia also establishes a complicity between “la oralidad que perdura como experiencia cultural

primaria de las mayorías, y la visualidad tecnológica, esa forma de ‘oralidad secundaria’ que tejen y organizan las gramáticas tecnoperceptivas de la radio, el cine, el video y la televisión” [oral communication that dominates the quotidian, as part of growing up, and a secondary oral communication, which derives from listening and watching radio, film, video, and television] (Martín-Barbero & Rey, 1999, p. 34).

In Latin America, as in many other places, distinctions between the use of a variety of screen and types of service (free, subscription, broadcast, video on demand, computers, smart TVs, and other digital devices) are not hard and fast. Rather, there is a flow across the categories, with differences established as social practices rather than technological essences (Verón, 2009). The latest data also confirm that Latin Americans watch TV in this broad sense *with others*—that the norm is collective viewing, across genres and media, due in part to the need to share resources in a zone where wealth is so unevenly skewed (ComScore, 2015). This adds to the cultural embeddedness of the medium and its orality.

Of Latin America’s six hundred million people, approximately half have encountered the internet, with growth of over 1,700% between 2000 and 2015. That puts the region just ahead of the Arab world and the global average, and well beyond the percentage of people who have experienced connection in Asia or Africa (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats10.htm>; <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>).

But such numbers can be misleading: being on line at some point in one’s life or in a given year is entirely different from enjoying broadband on a daily basis, and there is dramatic variation across nations within the region.

Mexico, the biggest and most influential Spanish-speaking country, boasts 45 million internet users, or 38% of the population, and Chile leads the region with 61%; but just 27% of Paraguayans and 20% of Salvadorans and Hondurans have access (Alvarez, 2014). The Comisión Económica para América Latina [Economic Commission for Latin America] (2015) indicates that the proportion of Latin Americans with regular access to broadband more than doubled between 2006 and 2013, from 20.7% to 46.7%. This compares with the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development average of 79% (only Mexico and Chile from the region qualify as members of this club of wealthy democracies). In addition, the quality of broadband in Latin America by contrast with, for instance, Sweden and Japan, is poor, which diminishes citizens’ capacity to download and stream at high bandwidth. There are obvious implications for replacing TV as a distribution system (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2012). And while the use of smartphones has exploded over the last five years, they are rarely connected to high-quality bandwidth—to 3G, let alone

5G (Mediatelecom, 2015; MilwardBrown, 2014).

There are also major disparities in pricing within the region. One megabit a second in Mexico costs US\$9, or 1% of average monthly income; in Bolivia, it is US\$63, or 31%. And access is structured unequally in terms of race, occupation, and region: indigenous people represent a third of rural workers in Latin America, and in some countries, over half are essentially disconnected. The digital divide between indigenous people and the rest of the population in Mexico is 0.3, in Panama 0.7, and Venezuela 0.6 (Bianchi, 2015). Hence the complexity of a notion such as *mestizaje* for explaining television: it both highlights and obscures the way that ideas of racial and cultural mixture are badges of pride, but inequality is still determined by racial and cultural difference. The extraordinary irony of *mestizaje* is captured in *realismo mágico*, as we shall see subsequently in discussions of regional history and *telenovelas*.

Unlike phones, tablets, or laptops, large screens in homes generally have defined locations—but not as per the TV sets of old, which were akin to furniture. The new screens, as in other countries, tend to be on walls, more like artworks than chairs and tables, albeit still located to facilitate joint family viewing, a collective experience. And beyond the domestic sphere, large televisions are prominent in public spaces, such as malls, bars, restaurants, metro stations in major cities, and even markets, in recognition that they are part of bringing people together peacefully in the region's mega-cities such as Buenos Aires and Mexico City (Repoll, 2014). This is of course not so much the case in extremely poor countries or in the rural and jungle areas that take up much of the continent, nor among the millions of impoverished Latin Americans who essentially live outside consumer norms.

With that caveat in mind, Latin Americans who can afford them clearly time their purchases of the latest audiovisual technologies to coincide with the four-yearly World Cup of men's football (Notimex, 2012). They show great passion for watching football and other sports on big screens and other collective sites beyond the domestic sphere, as per the classic US sports bar (García, 2010; McCarthy, 1995; Wenner, 1998). The option of going out to enjoy a football match or baseball game on a big screen evokes the same commitment and pleasure as being at the cinema to watch a movie, and it's a dominant mode of consuming screen sports in the region. Apart from in Argentina, where 80% of the population has subscription TV, most other countries don't have access to this kind of television in domestic spheres (ComScore, 2015).

Argentina is also distinct because during the Kirchner political dynasty of 2000–2015, the state assumed responsibility for televising football, and broadcast it on free-to-air TV (Mariotto, 2015). Elsewhere, football coverage has increasingly become a profit-making domain reserved for pay TV. The Mexican case exempli-

fies the norm. Televisa and América Móvil are conglomerates that offer “triple play” services to customers, with matches available live and simultaneously on TV, the internet, and smartphones. They have effective duopolistic control of both cable and satellite television. So Mexicans who want to enjoy football can only do so under certain specific conditions that oblige them to pay monthly rates to these corporations. As football is the most popular sport on TV in Latin America, and the vast majority of the public cannot afford to watch it at home, they are forced into communal viewing experiences in commercial spaces. The tendency across the continent is to watch TV in open contexts. For example, Paraguayan urban dwellers routinely view television in the street, in the liminal space between homes, hearths, and sidewalks (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006).

These viewing contexts are not so much substitutes for classic TV watching at home as new supplements that mix entertainment, socialization—and expenditure. Television in general, whether it is in domestic or public contexts, is primarily a source of entertainment (OBITEL, 2015). With the region's economies slowing down in 2015, it was one industry that appeared too solidly embedded into everyday life to shrink (Daswani, 2015).

How might we understand and explain the characteristics of Latin American TV and viewers' experiences of it, beyond these matters of circumstance, preference, and mode of interaction? What is the impact of a world where viewing is dominated by restrictions imposed by monopolistic companies, digital technologies are emerging, but TV remains the most important game in town for most Latin Americans?

3. The Latin American Re-Invention of TV

TV in Latin America is not just determined by technologies or programming schedules but by the materially-based, frequently collective interpretations of viewers, for whom texts are not necessarily over when they disappear from screens. This is particularly the case with fictional series, whose cultural impact expands beyond, for instance, the conclusion to a particular *telenovela* chapter, because the story line has an afterlife in audience thoughts and interactions.

The *realismo mágico* author and Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez (2002) entitled his memoir *Vivir para contarla* [*Living to Tell the Tale*]. Life in Latin America is seen as a narrative that draws on fictional tropes to organize and enrich itself in the face of extraordinary suffering, injustice, and inequality. This is a stark contrast to, for example, British empiricism or US pragmatism, which assume a sturdy certainty about truth that can be known in a way that is unembellished by fiction. At its heart, cultural difference is a means of portraying both the profound mixture of culture and language but also the way that pain and exploitation are experienced so unevenly. So for resi-

dents of the region, fictional genres are frequently more than they may first appear.

Beginning with revolutionary Cuban radio drama and expanding across Latin America, *telenovelas* have become opportunities to invent histories, imagine lives, seek liberation, engage in reinterpretation, encourage personal encounters, and seek new forms of communication. The symbiosis between audiences and *telenovelas* endures well beyond the moment of watching on a screen; it gains expression in private and public life, with families, neighbors, and co-workers (Martín-Barbero et al., 1992).

What happens on TV is transformed into the cultural, if not legal, property of spectators, as they process information, relate it to their own lives, and imbue it with new meaning. Families gather in the street to chat with their neighbors about what they are watching and have already seen, appropriating *novela* chapters as intertexts with their own lives (Orozco, 2014a). Everyday existence becomes mixed up with *telenovelas* as per *realismo mágico*, making both programs and experiences into an inter-calculation of the fictional and the factual, with the dividing lines cosmically blurred. Watching becomes a safe place for many Latin American viewers to emote, to cry and laugh, without social consequences, and to ponder the inequality that so discolors the supposed togetherness of *mestizaje* (Orozco, 2001).

We must also consider the political economy that both underwrites and is underwritten by this affective economy. The Observatorio Iberoamericano de Ficción Televisiva [Iberoamerican Fictional Television Observatory] (OBITEL) reports that fictional TV is the genre that attracts most financial as well as audience investment (2014). This investment is not only via production costs and advertising. It also takes the form of product placement and political propaganda within stories (Orozco & Franco, 2011). Venezuela under *Chavismo* and Mexico under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party] are prototypes of such investments. For example, in Mexico, expenditure on propaganda in fiction, what we might call “political placement,” exceeded US\$205 million in 2012—much more than parties spent on formal campaign advertising (Fundar Centro de Análisis e Investigación, 2015).

Like other regions, Latin America is seeing the owners of texts and networks diversifying to fit in with their younger audiences by making programs available through smartphones and other devices, and creating the new genre of *web novelas*, very short *telenovelas* that preserve the emotional intensity of their progenitors, but adapt the format to suit contemporary circumstances, technologies, and audience expectations—but for the popular classes, the old norm remains the most important (Orozco et al., 2012).

The combination of advertising and propaganda within fictional programs is a response to citizen-viewers’ fascination with the genre and industry and

academic studies into the impact of *novelas* on audiences (Clifford, 2005; Igartua & Vega, 2014; Slade & Beckenham, 2005). *Yo soy Bety la fea* [*I Am Ugly Betty*], a Colombian *telenovela* remade via format sales in the US as *Ugly Betty* and Mexico as *La fea más bella* [*The Beautiful Ugly One*], exemplifies these tendencies. A week before the 2006 Presidential elections in México, *La fea más bella* featured the following exchange: “Who are you voting for? I’m voting for Felipe Calderón.” Beyond the screen, Calderón won the subsequent election (Orozco & Franco, 2011). This historical example emphasizes both the significance of *orality* within the *novela* itself and *realismo mágico* as a mixture that can be produced by the audience as well as the network. Of course, this anecdote does not indicate mass observance of an instruction—that is not how product placements work. Rather, it is about constructing a climate of normalcy, whether that be purchasing a certain product or voting in a particular way. The climate of normalcy has to be understood within the peculiar circumstances that made contemporary Latin America.

4. The Particular Solitude of Latin America

We take the idea of this next section from two of the most illustrious titles in the canon of Latin American literature. *Laberinto de la Soledad* [*Labyrinth of Solitude*], written by Mexico’s Nobel Prizewinner Octavio Paz in 1950, recognized and incarnated a tragic sense of unfulfilled desire that has dogged citizens throughout Latin America, while García Márquez leapt to fame with his novel *Cien años de soledad* [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*] at the end of the 1960s. Jesús Martín-Barbero (2002) redispenses the metaphor of the century of solitude to suggest that since Latin America’s independence in the second decade of the 19th century, it has suffered not one but two hundred years of solitude.

These figures of speech and their literary and sociological iterations are attempts to represent some harsh realities: an independence that is only relative; impulsive and compulsive forms of communication, tied to the pain of conquest; and the complexities of *mestizaje* between conquerors and conquered, which arch across history in their effects. This solitude also finds expression in the insufficient and flawed communication among Latin American countries and between different social groups within them, leading to a history of violence.

For the two hundred years of solitude have been characterized by massacre after massacre, dictatorship after dictatorship. In addition to the grotesque inequalities that have produced revolutionary conditions, for example in Mexico, followed by authoritarianism, the region has been dogged by ruthless dictatorships at different times in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Paraguay. In the last century, Chile’s “Operation Condor”

and Mexico's Tlatelolco massacre eroded the prospects and hopes of Latin Americans throughout the region, above all young people. These anti-democratic tendencies have been dedicated to opposing land reform and other redistributive mechanisms for sharing national wealth fairly—and have often done so with collusion and stimulus from the US, in keeping with the latter's corporate self-interest and geopolitical priorities.

In the midst of solitude comes a dream of collective prosperity. Fiction becomes a site of dreams made material, a world where something not real can be made so (Orozco, 2014a, p. 4). It is a possible way out of the labyrinth, via catharsis, as per crying along with the heroine of a *telenovela* without feeling silly or guilty, identifying with a criminal in a police series without fearing arrest and incarceration, or shrieking with pleasure when one's favorite footballer scores without being able to kick a ball in earnest oneself. Televised fiction and sport embody and stimulate an abundance of dreams, desires, and identifications, at the intersection of reality and the screen.

Martín Barbero and German Rey argue that “Si la televisión atrae es porque la calle expulsa, es de los miedos que viven los medios” [“If TV draws people in, that is because the street rejects them—the media appeal because of fear of the world outside”] (1999, p. 29). They handily question the *donnée* that media monopolists fulfil the textual tastes of their audiences, satisfying Latin Americans' innate cultural needs. This is rather what neoclassical economists would call “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1978)—far below delivering what is truly desired, in this case safe passage out of the labyrinth.

But Martín-Barbero and Rey (1999) also argue that TV has had a positive influence as a decisive actor in political change in Latin America, offering new ways of “doing” politics. The “No” campaign in Chile in 1988 is an example. When the opportunity arose to reject the dictator Augusto Pinochet, who was seeking popular legitimacy through a plebiscite to counter global condemnation of his systematic abuses of human rights through mass incarceration, torture, and murder, the advertising campaign was won hands down by the left. Santiago's Museo de la Memoria y Derechos Humanos [Museum of Memory and Human Rights] (<http://www.museode lamemoria.cl/>) includes an archive of television advertising from the plebiscite: glossy, childlike nationalism from the Pinochet people versus dramatic, populist participation from his democratic opponents. The nation was evenly divided when the campaign began, which ended in triumph for the opposition, based in part on their promotional material (and the stance of the US Government, which had abetted the dictatorship, but instructed Pinochet to accept the result) (Khazan, 2013; National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 1988).

The vote was an endorsement of democracy, of joy,

of self-expression, of peaceful co-existence, and of a populist TV appeal against business, élites, the military, and their institutionalized violence. Pablo Larraín immortalized the triumph in his 2012 film *NO*, which emphasizes the role of communications and TV, personified by the Mexican actor Gael García Bernal, creative director of the advertising agency supporting the case against Pinochet, who must struggle against national, professional, and personal demons, contradictions, and opponents.³

Something similar occurred in Mexico during the 1970s via various *novelas* produced by the former theater director, the television executive Miguel Sabido, and broadcast on Televisa. These were thought of as “telenovelas de refuerzo social” [“telenovelas of social solidarity”] (Cueva et al., 2011). The questions they addressed included birth control and literacy. So one series explained the benefits of family planning and restricting the number of children to two per family. Another showed that illiterate citizens struggle in life by contrast with those who can read and write.

The producers' objectives were met over time. After watching the *telenovela Ven Conmigo* [Come with Me] (1975), of the ten million illiterate adult Mexicans at the time, a million soon enrolled in literacy classes run by the Education Ministry. And following *Acompáñame* [Let's Go] (1977) 562,464 people were using contraceptives, almost a third more than prior to its broadcast. This is a fine example of social merchandising via product placement—whereby a policy outcome is facilitated by embedding proposed new conduct in TV fiction (Garnica, 2011, p. 96).

This political-economy approach applies across borders. In the last five years, primetime in most Latin American countries has been dominated by regionally-produced *telenovelas* (Vassallo & Orozco, 2014). Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina are the dominant producers, while Uruguay, Ecuador, and Chile have also entered the market (OBITEL, 2014). OBITEL shows that regional national TV fiction characteristically draws the highest ratings across Latin America. This has been theorized as a function of audience preferences for cultural proximity when available (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013, p. 3).

The success of such closeness does not, however, necessarily militate against the ongoing power of the US as a TV exporter to the region, because of its capacity to set prices below the costs of local material, to draw on high production values, and to target cable and satellite specialty channels. But again, this amounts to a case of bounded rationality by Latin American TV stations and audiences; both might prefer to buy and watch local texts—hence the direction of primetime—but will accept cheaper if high-quality foreign product that lacks cultural consanguinity (Miller, 2010).

³ See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2059255>

5. The Future of Television: The Reign of “the Televisual”

Of course, we are in a new epoch. Television, film, radio, and the press continue to play important roles, even as they struggle for co-existence and dominance with new screens, new technologies, and—above all—new “*figuras de razón*” [“rationalities”] of communication (Martin-Barbero, 2001). This new era has been labeled “post television”; but such leading authors as Milly Buonanno (2015) disagree, while acknowledging that TV must make its way in a new constellation of communications.

In a comparative analysis of two key perspectives on the end of television—the Eurocentric and the Latin American—the Argentine researcher Mario Carlón (2012) concludes that while a Eurocentric position emphasizes the end of TV, a Latin American view stresses the possibility of a longer life for the device, even though it is changing. Television’s prior hegemony as *the* cultural machine of the everyday may now face competition from other devices, but it continues to be a principal “*programadora de la vida social*” [“programmer of everyday life”].

The former position sees TV becoming extinct (Carlón & Scolari, 2014, p. 7), displaced by computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones, driven by audience demands and corporate inventiveness. “Before and after the Internet,” “before and after Facebook,” “before and after Twitter,” “before and after Google,” are periodisations that exemplify such vanguardist thinking. It focuses remorselessly on technology as comprehensive ways to understand the social order and textuality (Piscitelli, 2010).

True believers invest with unparalleled gusto in Schumpeterian entrepreneurs, evolutionary economics, creative industries, and technological revolutions. Faith in devolved media-making amounts to a secular religion, offering transcendence in the here and now via a “literature of the eighth day, the day after Genesis” (Carey, 2005). “My children don’t watch television,” “Nobody I know does it,” or “Kids today aren’t interested,” are part of *techno-booster’s* everyday discourse.

A fetish for endless upgrades as part of built-in obsolescence fuels this discourse. We are supposed to forget the contemporary relations of people, money, regulation, and power that shape technology—the exploited workers, the toxic factories, the wasteful global supply system, the patent wars, the trade barriers, the planned obsolescence (Maxwell & Miller, 2014). And the fact that almost a billion people worldwide subscribe to satellite and cable TV remains an inconvenient truth (Friedman, 2013)!

Authors who represent the Anglo-Saxon perspective, such as Elihu Katz (2009), emphasize technological developments as the major causes of change to television, while those from the Latin American side pay

more attention to the social practices that television audiences favor. The latter recognize today’s accelerated technological transformations, which in turn influence *televidencias* via the *mestizaje* and *realismo mágico* that characterize Latin-American popular culture, rather than some essence of new technologies.

Beyond these positions, a more practical question can be posed: what is “the televisual” today (Orozco, 2014c, p. 4)? By “the televisual,” we mean a quality that is essential to all screens, based as they are on TV style and form, and subject to the representational protocols that both limit and stretch televisual norms.

Television is not the only form of communication that has installed itself inside homes, but it has long been the true warehouse of culture, bringing cinema, theater, circus, dance, documentary, drama, sports, and music into both private and shared spaces.

In short, TV has been a model for internet-related media in its convergence of genres and platforms, its instantaneity, and its archive. This blend of immediacy and memory, of present and past, curated for viewers but increasingly available on demand as well as via structured schedules and via specialist stations in addition to comprehensive services, is becoming available across devices—but in the technological, legislative, and commercial context of the televisual landscape. This is particularly true in Latin America, with its uneven and unequal distribution of broadband versus the near-ubiquity of television. Beyond this political-economic foundation, the success of television lies in its essentialist ontology: people believe the evidence of their own empirical engagement with spoken and seen reality, allied, paradoxically, to TV’s fantasy world and openness to self-insertion by viewers into the pleasures of identification and de-identification (Orozco, 2014c, p. 16). The classically denotative, seemingly non-interpretative notion of TV reality still applies (Carlón, 2013; Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 1980).

As for the future, we expect to see increased production of Latin American TV fiction, in both broadcast and pay segments of the industry. This will probably extend beyond the typical *telenovela* to include more miniseries and docudramas, and beyond the traditionally strong private sector via competition from public channels. “Narco series,” which are currently fashionable on pay television, illustrate niche markets that may develop. The future will clearly see an abundance of fiction, which will emerge across a variety of platforms, albeit limited by broadband access. Football will continue to be hugely popular (ComScore, 2015).

Despite the specificities of particular countries, some elements of communications are very much in common across the 20th century and on to the present—namely the way that daily life for hundreds of millions of people has been not just affected but in fact structured by the media (Press & Williams, 2010). This experience has crested over the past two decades, in

Latin America as in Western Europe and the US. In keeping with this transformation, populations have been subject to “audienciación”⁴ [“becoming audiences”] in ways that alter the rest of daily life (Orozco, 1996). Being an audience—being a public—means connecting with others, but in a form mediated through screens that make us objects as well as subjects of knowledge and representation.

These forms of identity may now amount to “self-mass communication” (Castells, 2009, p. 99). What had previously been a centralized form of communication still matters, but can be customized to more individual experiences. This new tendency does not so much mark the death of television as one more moment in its development and transformation, to be put alongside color, cable, satellite, and demand services. And its textuality and cultural resonance in the Americas will in part be decided by *realismo mágico* and *mestizaje*.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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⁴ This concept was first proposed by Guillermo Orozco (1996) and has been revived by Sonia Livingstone (2015).

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