

## The Empire Writes Back?

### The Challenge of the Domestic Portuguese *Telenovela*

The concerted move to the top of the ratings of the domestic Portuguese *telenovela* – or *novela* as it is more commonly known – has been without any doubt the major cultural development in Portugal in the last three years. It has both marked and expressed a significant and almost certainly irreversible change in the ways in which the domestic television stations conceive of their relationship with their audience, it has had powerful knock-on effects on the Portuguese television industry and the production companies associated with it, and it has intensified the debate among Portugal's cultural and intellectual élites regarding the definition of culture and its place in what they see as the life of the nation. Though driven initially by primarily economic reasons, its reverberations throughout Portuguese society have been widespread and sustained. This article will examine the history of the *telenovela* in Portugal – with particular emphasis on the domestic *novela* – since the reestablishment of democracy, and will attempt to place it within the broader framework of changes within the Portuguese media system and within Portuguese society at large during that time.

#### National Product Seeks National Audience

Portuguese audiences' first experience of the *telenovela* was not of the domestic product, but of imported *novelas* produced by Brazilian giant *Globo*. In fact, in the wake of the collapse of the Salazar-Caetano regime in 1974 and the enormous shake-out of Portuguese society which followed, Portugal was the first country in Europe to import Latin American *novelas* of any kind.

#### *The Late Seventies – Unchallenged Brazilian Dominance*

The first Brazilian serial to arrive was *Gabriela* in 1977, starring Sónia Braga and adapted by Walter Avancini from the novel *Gabriela, Cravo e Canela* by Jorge Amado. It went out from May to November of that year, and such was its success that legend still has it that streets were empty while it was on air, no-one dared phone anyone else for the entire duration of the

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programme and a cabinet meeting on the day of the final episode was interrupted since none of the ministers wanted to miss the end of the story. A key element of its appeal was its astonishing freshness for Portuguese audiences emerging from one of the longest dictatorships in the western world. They appreciated above all the naturalness of the acting, the frankness with which it tackled what were for them still difficult subjects, and the sheer range of topics broached. As Eduardo Cintra Torres recalled in a recent article in *Público* (8 June 2001) :

«In 1977 there arrived on our shores a novela featuring streetlife, politics, town and country, social types, social conflicts, literary characters, humour, locations, smells and tastes, rich and poor, religion and superstitions, freedom and oppression, popular wisdom and bourgeois wisdom».

*Gabriela* was followed in 1977-8 by *O Casarão* and *O Astro* and paved the way for an influx of Brazilian *novelas* which would reach its peak in the mid-nineteen-nineties, and which continues, if somewhat less forcefully, to the present day. During the years of the Rádio Televisão Portuguesa's (RTP) monopoly, the number of *novelas* screened per day was relatively modest. However, from the early nineties on, with the arrival of the commercial channels and the emergence of alternative Brazilian producers such as Manchete and Bandeirantes, there could at times be as many as a dozen showing on any given day in Portugal<sup>1</sup>.

### *The Eighties : Early Attempts at a Domestic Product*

Given the sustained success of the Brazilian *novelas* throughout the second half of the seventies and the early eighties, and the cultural unease this gave rise to regarding the dominance achieved by a non-domestic product (more on this below), it was only a question of time before some kind of Portuguese response was forthcoming. However, though *telenovelas* are often dismissed by highbrow critics as cheap and unchallenging, the task of producing a programme which is to go out five or even six (or in exceptional cases seven) days a week over a period of six or seven months is an extremely demanding one, requiring considerable resources and substantial expertise, and these were not widely available in Portugal at the time. None the less, a number of *telenovelas* were produced on a somewhat sporadic basis in the course of the eighties, either by RTP itself or by independent producers such as Edipim and Estúdios Atlântida for RTP. They included Francisco Nicholson's *Vila Faia* (1982) – in fact the first domestic *telenovela* to be produced anywhere in Europe – *Origens* (1983), *Passerelle* (1984), *Chuva na Areia* (1985) – adapted from an unpublished text by Luís de Sttau Monteiro – and *Palavras Cruzadas* (1987).

The cultural memory of these products maintained in the contemporary Portuguese press – relating above all to *Vila Faia* due to its particular trailblazing status – is to some extent contradictory. They are remembered as somewhat unsophisticated, exhibiting in particular a rather stilted acting style, but at the same time as a key Portuguese response to an unwelcome process of Brazilian cultural domination. Thus *Expresso* of 20 October 2001

1. See J. Paixão da COSTA, *Telenovela : um modo de produção. O Caso Português*, Lisbon, Edições Universitárias Lusófonas, 2003 : 175-205, for comprehensive lists of all the Brazilian *novelas* screened in Portugal between 1977 and 1999.

described *Vila Faia* as a «*resposta caseira à hegemonia da "fábrica" televisiva brasileira*» [homegrown answer to the domination of the Brazilian television "factory"]: it was to be, the journalist wrote, «*uma telenovela portuguesa que falasse de nós, de quem somos ou apostamos ser*» [a Portuguese *telenovela* which spoke about us, about who we are or who we hope to be]. Though the *Jornal de Notícias* of 8 December 2002 remembers it as «*um sucesso estrondoso*» [a resounding success], the truth, however, is that the viewing figures for the Portuguese productions always lagged behind those of the Brazilian *novelas* in the eighties, a situation which was to persist for many years to come.

### *The Nineties and the Emergence of NBP*

Following *Palavras Cruzadas*, no further domestic *novela* would appear in Portugal for another five years. The intervening years were momentous ones not just for Portuguese television, but for Portugal in general. The election of Cavaco Silva in 1985 had brought to an end the domination of Portuguese politics by the *Partido Socialista* and ushered in an era characterised by a much stronger and more open commitment to an avowedly neo-liberal agenda. Following a trend which had spread throughout Europe since making its first appearance in Italy in the early eighties, it soon became clear that the days of RTP's monopoly were numbered. The licence fee as a source of income was abolished in 1991, causing a much greater dependence on advertising for revenue. The following year saw the launch of Portugal's first commercial channel SIC (Sociedade Independente de Comunicação) by former Prime Minister Pinto Balsemão, this being followed in turn one year later by the second commercial channel TVI (Televisão Independente)<sup>2</sup>. Though originally owned by groups linked to the Catholic Church, TVI quickly became a secular station and is currently owned by Media Capital. In the following year, 1993, RTP became a «*sociedade anónima*».

Part of RTP's response both to its altered financial situation and to the competition from the new stations was a return to the domestic *novela*. Despite the break of five years, the experience gained in the eighties was not lost. Nicolau Breyner, who had directed all the earlier productions and had also been involved in them as an actor and sometimes as a co-author, set up his own company NBP (Nicolau Breyner Productions) and secured the collaboration of a number of actors who had played leading roles in the earlier *telenovelas*, such as Francisco Nicholson and Ruy de Carvalho. In 1992 RTP commissioned *Cinzas*, a 150-episode *novela* written by Francisco Nicholson, from this company and in the following eight years NBP would go on to produce no fewer than a further thirteen *novelas* for RTP, these being *Verão Quente* (1993-1994), *Na Paz dos Anjos* (1994), *Desencontros* (1994-1995), *Roseira Brava* (1995), *Primeiro Amor* (1995-1996), *Vidas de Sal* (1996), *Filhos do Vento* (1996-1997), *A Grande Aposta* (1997), *Terra Mãe* (1997-1998), *Os Lobos* (1998), *A Lenda da Garça* (1999), *Ajuste de Contas* (1999-2000) and *Senhora das Águas* (2000)<sup>3</sup>.

2. F. CÁDIMA, *História e crítica da comunicação*, Lisbon, Edições Século XXI, 1996 : 156.

3. In 1993 RTP also screened the *telenovela* *A Banqueira do Povo*, directed by the late Walter Avancini and produced by Máquina dos Sonhos.

The main difference between a *telenovela* and its close cousin the soap opera is, as is well known, the former's narrative closure. Soaps can run indefinitely but a *telenovela* rarely (there are exceptions) lasts beyond six months. As a result a *telenovela* culture exhibits a much greater range of narrative and thematic diversity than one dominated by soaps. In the course of the nineties, NBP's productions for RTP not only borrowed from a number of genres ranging from the whodunnit (*Desencontros*) to the historical family drama (*Filhos do Vento*), they also varied greatly in tone from the whimsical and humorous (*Na Paz dos Anjos*, *Terra Mãe*) to the epic (*Roseira Brava*) and were also set in many different parts of the country. *Roseira Brava* was the first to move outside Lisbon, being set in the Baixo Alentejo, while *Vidas de Sal* was set in Setúbal, *Filhos do Vento* in the Ribatejo and so on.

Though produced at breathtaking speed – a 150-episode *novela* was usually completed in around six months – NBP's productions of the nineteen-nineties often exhibited unexpectedly high production values. Outside shooting increased with more or less every production, and the filming techniques – particularly in the opening episodes where the main aim was to hold the audience's attention for a new story and impress the critics – were at times cinematic in nature. Despite this, however, the figures show quite clearly that, while these productions could perform well outside prime time – *Os Lobos* achieved a 30 % share in its access-prime-time slot – they were not able to compete successfully with the prime-time Brazilian imports, a situation which would continue when, in 1995, *Globo* brought its long relationship with RTP to an end and began selling its *novelas* exclusively to SIC (in which it was a minority shareholder)<sup>4</sup>. On average the Brazilian productions attracted twice as many viewers as their Portuguese counterparts – typically just over two million as opposed to one million – and could on occasions achieve an almost 50 % share.

### *TVI and the Triumph of National Production*

Ever since the arrival of the commercial stations in the early nineties, competition between the three main Portuguese channels (RTP1, SIC and TVI) has taken place overwhelmingly in the realm of the *telenovela*. SIC's rise to prominence, overtaking RTP1 as the most watched channel in 1995, was premised centrally on its agreement with *Globo* which deprived RTP of its source of Brazilian *novelas* and meant that these were now only available on the private channel. The remarkable change in fortune experienced by TVI from the end of the nineties on was likewise heavily dependent on a gamble taken by its new director regarding the domestic *telenovela*. The inclusion of domestic *telenovelas* in its portfolio of programmes had in fact long been a stated aim of TVI, but – with the brief exception of the *Atlântida* production *Telhados de Vidro* in 1993 – it had been unable to do so due to the cost implications in relation to its modest levels of income. As Ana Paula Fernandes points out :

«In the case of TVI, for example, which wanted to be a generalist channel developing "as complete a schedule as possible (health, travel, Portuguese *telenovelas*, programmes about fados, etc.) where domestic programming

4. For a more detailed analysis of this situation see H. O'DONNELL, *Good Times, Bad Time: Soap Operas and Society in Western Europe*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1999 : 147-158.

would play a significant role and was very expensive”, none the less over the past five years its programming strategies have changed in accordance with the budget available...»<sup>5</sup>.

In 1999, however, this was to change. José Eduardo Moniz, who had previously been a member of the board of directors of RTP, a position he had given up in 1994, became director of TVI on 22 September 1998. The task he set himself was that of turning the station round, since it had from the outset lagged far behind the other two main stations in the ratings. He was in no doubt as regards the magnitude of the task. As he said at the time: «gosto de missões que parecem difíceis, mas que não acredito serem impossíveis» [I relish missions which seem difficult, but which I do not believe to be impossible]. Among his first moves was the screening of the NBP production *Todo o Tempo do Mundo* – a short-run fiction serial originally intended to last twenty-six episodes, but whose unexpectedly good ratings resulted in it being extended to fifty-six. Though TVI continued to remain in third place, its audience figures climbed steadily throughout 1999, and the station finished the year with an audience share of 14 %, its best score ever.

In early 2000 TVI launched its first domestic *novela* – produced by NBP – entitled *Jardins Proibidos*. The tale of a fifteen-year-old girl from a working-class district and her search to find her real parents, it also enjoyed considerable success: having been originally planned for only thirteen episodes, it was continually extended in response to audience demand and finally reached 160 episodes. *Jardins Proibidos* was the first domestically produced Portuguese *telenovela* ever to outperform a Brazilian *novela* being screened at the same time – *Globo's Laços de Família* being shown at that time on SIC. In September of the same year TVI launched a Portuguese version of *Big Brother* – produced for the station by Endemol Portugal – a programme which had already been turned down by SIC, and a month later, for the first time ever, it overtook RTP in the ratings. Other domestically produced programmes quickly followed – not only *novelas* such as *Olhos de Água* but other formats such as the fiction series *Super Pai* and the hospital drama series *SOS Crianças* – as a result of whose popularity TVI occasionally outperformed SIC in prime-time viewing.

Following the success of *Jardins Proibidos* and *Olhos de Água*, in September 2001, TVI launched three domestic *telenovelas* simultaneously – all of them NBP productions – *Anjo Selvagem*, *Filha do Mar* and *Nunca Digas Adeus...* The first of these in particular dominated the ratings more or less continuously throughout its long run (despite occasionally being momentarily ousted from first spot by football and *Big Brother*), and TVI's position as Portugal's most watched station was assured. At the end of September 2001 it had achieved an audience share of 34.4 % as against SIC's 30.5 %. Other domestic productions have followed, and yet more are in preparation. Following a pattern developed by *Globo* many years ago<sup>6</sup>, a certain amount of internal differentiation has occurred, with some productions being reserved for the weekend, while others are given a late evening slot and deal with more «adult» themes. TVI's domestically produced *telenovelas* over the last three years – all NBP products – can, therefore, be summarised as follows :

5. A.P. FERNANDES, *Televisão de Público*, Coimbra, Minerva Coimbra, 2001 : 86.

6. T. TUFTE, *Living with the Rubbish Queen : Telenovelas, Culture and Modernity in Brazil*, Luton, University of Luton Press, 2000 : 104-106.

1) Jardins Proibidos	2000 (weekdays)
2) Olhos de Água	2001 (weekdays)
3) Filha do Mar	Sept. 2001 (daily except Sunday)
4) Anjo Selvagem	Sept. 2001 (daily except Sunday)
5) Nunca Digas Adeus	Sept. 2001 (daily)
6) Sonhos Traídos	April 2002 (weekdays)
7) Tudo por amor	April 2002 (daily, late evening)
8) Ultimo Beijo	April 2002 (weekends only)
9) A Jóia de África	Sept. 2002 (weekdays)
10) Amanhecer	Oct. 2002 (weekdays)
11) Coração Malandro	Feb. 2003 (weekdays)
12) Saber Amar	March 2003 (weekdays)
13) O Teu Olhar	Aug. 2003 (weekdays)
14) Morangos com Açúcar	Sept. 2003 (weekdays)

Producing this number of *telenovelas* represents a major logistical challenge for NBP and its various studios. The pace of filming is punishing with very little time for rehearsal, a large-scale and unrelenting effort in terms of ensuring continuity requires a sophisticated infrastructure and record-keeping system relating to wardrobe, make-up and so on, and the producers can be called on to make extra scenes available at very short notice. According to an article in the *Diário de Notícias* of 8 September 2002, Paula Neves, the female lead of *Anjo Selvagem*, worked twelve hours a day recording on average twenty scenes per day. In fact, the particular case of *Anjo Selvagem* deserves some special mention here, since it eventually became the longest-running *telenovela* (of any nationality) ever shown on Portuguese television. In July 2002 it reached the year mark, passing the milestone of what *Expresso* described as its «*impensáveis 500 episódios*» [unthinkable 500 episodes] (20 July 2002). This was celebrated as something of a landmark in the specialised television press. In a number of interviews published in magazine such as *TV Mais*, *TV Guia*, *TV 7 Días* and *telenovelas* the actors expressed both pride at the staying power of the serial and tiredness at the gruelling pace :

«Another record in domestic fiction is beaten. "Anjo Selvagem" is the longest-running programme ever and has left its protagonists proud of the work carried out. This is the first time a novela has completed a year of recording. And with so much success as well».

«A year of intense work has left the novela's protagonists tired, but very satisfied with the results achieved».

*Anjo Selvagem* finally came to an end on 25 February 2003 after clocking up well over 600 episodes. Its last episode attracted an audience of 2,518,000 viewers, a 44.5% share.

### ***SIC Responds with Yet More National Fiction***

Given the astonishing and sustained success of these productions, it was only a matter of time before SIC also decided to go down the road of the domestically produced *telenovela*. In the spring of 2001 it launched *Ganância*, an NBP production, NBP thereby joining a select group European producers (Endemol in the Netherlands, or Ufa in Germany, for example) in the (for them happy) position of producing television serials for competing companies. *Ganância's* initially poor ratings saw its Brazilian scriptwriter

Lúcia Abreu fired and replaced in mid-production by Francisco Nicholson, and on 7 January 2002 SIC followed up with *Fúria de Viver*, produced this time by Endemol Portugal, and in fact an adaptation of the Italian soap opera *Vivere*. Having been ousted from the management of his own company in 1999, Nicolau Breyner was a major player in this Endemol *novela*, both as an actor and as a director. Francisco Nicholson's *O Olhar da Serpente* followed *Fúria de Viver* in the Autumn of 2002, but was unable to establish itself as an audience favourite and, like many a *novela* before it, soon found itself relegated to late-night slots.

In fact SIC's productions have been altogether less successful than TVI's. *O Jogo*, an Endemol Portugal production, was to have been launched in March 2003, but so far there have been no signs of this happening, and indeed SIC's «flirtation» with the domestic *telenovela* appears to be – despite on-going references to its «*próxima novela portuguesa*» [next Portuguese *novela*] in its own publicity – to some extent on hold. While it is perhaps a little early to speculate meaningfully on the reasons for this, the fact that at least some of these productions – *O Olhar da Serpente*, for example – have been closed-format *telenovelas* (more on this below) may have inhibited their ability to create a truly organic relationship with their audience.

SIC continues to screen its Brazilian *novelas*, of course, and these continue to enjoy entirely acceptable levels of success – *O Clone* was a popular production in the summer of 2002, and its locations in Morocco sparked an interest in that country as a tourist destination as well as a rise in those attending belly-dancing classes – but the period of their dominance of the ratings appears to be definitively over.

#### «*Ficção Nacional*»: the New Generation

In an earlier analysis of the domestically produced Portuguese *novelas* of the first half of the nineties, I argued that their relatively poor performance in comparison to their Brazilian competitors was due to their overwhelmingly conservative feel compared with the Brazilian products' more complex and contemporary agenda and the latter's generally more progressive and forward-looking approach to a range of social issues such as racism, homosexuality, intergenerational conflict and so on<sup>7</sup>. This difference was, of course, obvious to many in Portugal, not least the viewers themselves who made their preferences abundantly clear in the *telenovelas* they chose to watch. The issue was in fact raised explicitly by Sebastião Lima Rego, president of the Associação de Telespectadores, in an article published in *Público* on 22 October 1995 :

«As a rule, the *telenovelas* from our sister country [Brazil] carry laudable, and in some cases even progressive social, cultural and political values. In fact, Brazilian *telenovelas* frequently defend women's rights, promote the modernisation of family and intergenerational relationships; denounce racism; attack caciquism and political clientelism... they promote democracy and democratic procedures; they attack corruption; they fight against prejudice... In this, let's face it, they distinguish themselves from the Portuguese *telenovelas*, which are usually conformist and conservative».

7. H. O'DONNELL, *op. cit.* : 147-158.

This conservatism was indexically signalled in the domination of the Portuguese narratives by older (on occasions *very* much older) characters and by a generally timid approach to issues such as racism or a tendency to divert topics such as homosexuality in the direction of caricature. Perhaps the most striking visual difference of the new *novelas* is, in fact, the much greater (though not exclusive) protagonism accorded to the younger characters (a logical move for TVI, since its audience was mostly «*jovens entre os 15 e os 45 anos, que acompanham com mais assiduidade*»<sup>8</sup> [young people between 15 and 45 who are its most frequent viewers]). Though the older generations have by no means disappeared, it was the younger characters who set the pace in *Anjo Selvagem*, for example. Their faces smiled from the covers of television magazines and at times generalist magazines, they appeared on posters and even on the news. Portuguese television – or at least part of it – has finally made contact with its younger audience without, as the viewing figures show quite clearly, alienating the older audience at the same time.

However, the major structural expression of the conservatism of the earlier products was the fact that *all* the domestic RTP *telenovelas* of the nineties were *closed* narratives: in other words, the entire *telenovela* had been shot, edited and was «in the can» before the first episode was screened. This meant that there was no possibility whatsoever of responding to audience or critical reactions to the product, writing in new issues at short notice, developing characters this way or that according to audience feedback – all standard features of soap operas everywhere and also of *Globo's telenovelas*.

The major structural difference between the new generation of domestic *novelas* as compared to their predecessors is their open-ended nature: in other words they are still in production when they go on air. A large-scale research operation constantly tests audience reaction to the narrative and the direction of a particular *novela* can be changed at short notice in response to this feedback. And there is no doubting the greater freshness and much more expansive nature of the new products. They deal courageously with difficult issues: *Nunca Digas Adeus*, for example, centred in novel and non-stereotypical ways on a story of family breakdown, while *O Último Beijo* deals not only with surrogate motherhood but had a storyline related to alcoholism and violence. Outside shooting has increased enormously – indeed the arrival of a film crew in town is often seen as a major event – and is not limited to mainland Portugal. *Sonhos Traídos*, for example, deals with the history of Portuguese emigrants in Venezuela. Sections of *Olhos de Água* were shot in Angola and dealt with the effect on people's lives of the events of 25 April 1974, while part of *Filha do Mar* was filmed in the Azores. The early sections of *A Jóia de África* – described recently as «*a maior produção nacional de sempre da TVI*» [TVI's biggest domestic production ever] (*Diário de Notícias*, 27 September 2002) – were shot in various locations in Mozambique, and involved an eighty-strong crew spending several months in that country. These locations have also allowed these *novelas* to raise issues relating to Portugal's imperial past and the process of decolonisation. Summing up the many factors in the success of the domestic products, an article which appeared in the *Correio do Minho* in 2001 suggested:

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8. A.P. FERNANDES, *op. cit.*: 100.



«Television audiences saw that domestic fiction had a closer intellectual and emotional link with our way of seeing things and began to transfer their loyalty to the domestic products. Of course the progress in scriptwriting and in the performance of the actors are also not insignificant factors... We still do not have the ease of the Brazilians, but we're getting there»<sup>9</sup>.

### ***Telenovela Talk***

The phenomenon of «soap talk» – the process whereby soap opera viewers respond to each episode by discussing it with others, relating the storylines to their own lives and to broader social issues – is a well-known one<sup>10</sup>. In *telenovela* cultures this, of course, takes the form of «*telenovela talk*» and is sustained not only through informal networks of friends and acquaintances but also through the television magazines and magazines dedicated entirely to *telenovelas* – in particular through their letter pages – but also more recently via the internet and websites and chat rooms set up specifically for this purpose. Less attention, however, has been paid to a different kind of «soap» and «*telenovela talk*» – the discourse of critics, academics and intellectuals in general generated by the astonishing popularity of these products in their respective societies. This discourse is known to be overwhelmingly negative more or less everywhere<sup>11</sup>, and Portugal is, of course, no exception in this respect.

### ***Responding to «Reverse Imperialism»***

Though *Gabriela* was obviously much loved by the popular audience in Portugal, the legend of an entire nation held in thrall by this production is not, of course, unproblematically correct. In fact *Gabriela* and its successors caused considerable disquiet among Portugal's cultural elites regarding the preference of «their» working classes for a foreign product (we may of course recall that a not dissimilar unease was aroused in other European countries by the arrival of North American productions such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in the eighties). For example, Osvaldo Meira Trigueiro of the Universidade Federal da Paraíba recalls how :

«The *telenovelas* were so popular in Portugal that this initially caused concern among the Portuguese artistic class regarding the invasion of this new cultural product. The Brazilian *telenovelas* were occupying those spaces where Portuguese producers and actors might find work»<sup>12</sup>.

Particular concern was expressed at the unheard-of levels of popularity enjoyed by a product which those from a traditional literary-academic background found to be dull, repetitive, monotonous and lacking in what they considered originality. João Lopes, later film critic for *Expresso* and film consultant for RTP, expressed the views of many when he wrote in *A Luta* in October 1977 :

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9. Available at <[www.ics.uminho.pt/dcc/doc/felisbela/cronicas/rede%20Globo.htm](http://www.ics.uminho.pt/dcc/doc/felisbela/cronicas/rede%20Globo.htm)>.  
 10. M.E. BROWN, *Soap Opera and Women's Talk : the Pleasure of Resistance*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1994.  
 11. For an analysis see R.C. ALLEN, «Introduction», in R.C. ALLEN (ed.), *To Be Continued... Soap Operas Around The World*, London, Routledge, 1995. Other examples are by no means difficult to find.  
 12. Biblioteca On-line das Ciências da Comunicação, <[http://bocc.ubi.pt/pag/\\_texto.php3?html2=trigueiro-osvaldo-telenovela-Portugal.html](http://bocc.ubi.pt/pag/_texto.php3?html2=trigueiro-osvaldo-telenovela-Portugal.html)>.
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«In its apparent fragmentation and discontinuity, Gabriela ends up being the facile and smiling praise of continuity – the world here is linear, flat, logical... We drift along in the most peaceable and conformist mental mediaevalism: Gabriela is the daily, public and euphoric celebration of passivity and monotony, in a word of mediocrity»<sup>13</sup>.

Even a review such as that written in the *Diário de Notícias* in 1981 by Adriano Duarte Rodrigues – now Professor in the *Departamento de comunicação social at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa* and Director of the *Centro de estudos de comunicação e linguagens* – while trying to grasp something of the appeal of the Brazilian *telenovela* for the Portuguese viewer ends up stressing its pacifying role arising primarily out of its repetitive nature :

«Its legitimacy resides entirely in the inculcation of a certain order of things. It is this normalised order which assures it its undeniable efficiency and naturalness. We can find it in the popular saying or stereotypical sentence which sums up the plot: "Nothing lasts for ever...", "the heart has its reasons which reason does not know", "slowly does it" are just a few examples of this spontaneous philosophy of life which brings coherence to the plot of the *telenovela*»<sup>14</sup>.

The continuing success of the Brazilian products for a period of almost twenty-five years would mean that these anxieties would be a constant feature of the discourse of a particular group of domestic cultural producers and intermediaries for the remainder of the twentieth century. For example, in his introduction to *Teleditadura : Diário dum Espectador*, published in 1995, the same João Lopes, who dismissed *Gabriela* in 1977, refers to the Brazilian *telenovela* eighteen years later as «a máxima degradação da ficção televisiva» [the ultimate degradation of television fiction]<sup>15</sup>, and indeed a major theme of his entire book is his anguish at the way in which Portuguese culture has become a Brazilian-*telenovela* culture, with all that that implies. In his «diary entry» for 18 March 1994, for example, he complains :

«What we are dealing with is the existence of a veritable Brazilian cultural imperialism which, day after day, takes the form of the bombardment of our country with ways of making television which depend, essentially, on the constant repetition of the most paralysed and paralysing fictional register imaginable (the *telenovela*, to be precise). The rest is nothing but a series of skirmishes which simply repeat the same effect: the real power of this sector of Brazilian culture in the definition of the totality of Portuguese audiovisual culture»<sup>16</sup>.

This concern was not, however, limited to academics and critics. When the domestic production *Desencontros* was moved out of its prime-time slot in 1995 by RTP to make way for a Brazilian *novela*, this triggered a significant controversy in the Portuguese television press, with Moita Flores, the author of *Desencontros*, claiming that «A *telenovela* brasileira é um imperialismo : por melhor que a gente faça, é difícil romper com isso, apesar dos actores portugueses serem muito melhores» [The Brazilian *telenovela* is a form of imperialism: no matter how much better what we do is, it is difficult to overcome that, even though the Portuguese actors are much better] (*TV 7 Dias*, 21 July 1995). One of the actors, for his part, argued that the Portuguese viewers were not getting the products they deserved : «Portugal não é o Terceiro Mundo e o

13. Quoted in J. LOPES, *Teleditadura, Diário dum Espectador*, Lisbon, Quetzal Editores, 1995 : 13-14.

14. Reproduced in A. D. RODRIGUES, *O Campo dos Media*, Lisbon, Vega, [n.d.] : 88-89.

15. J. LOPES, *op. cit.* : 12.

16. *Ibid.* : 80-81.

*público português é um público muito exigente... acho que somos um povo muito evoluído a esse nível, embora não o sejamos a nível económico, nem a nível político, ou a nível social»* [Portugal is not the Third World and the Portuguese public is a very demanding public... I believe we are a highly developed people on that level, even though we may not be so on an economic level, or a political level, or a social level] (TV 7 Dias, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1995).

***Cultural Imperialism... or Cultural Elitism ?***

Anyone taking this collective indignation at face value would have, needless to say, considerable difficulty understanding where an audience of two-million-plus for the Brazilian *novelas* in question might have come from, but such a stout defence of the Portuguese *telenovela* or its audience is somewhat misleading. In fact the rise to prominence of the domestic product has shown clearly that attacks on the *telenovela* in terms of its country of origin and supposed threats of cultural imperialism were always an ideological alibi. They were primarily, as I have argued elsewhere, «aggressive reactions by the intellectual élites... to their loss of control over the management of public taste»<sup>17</sup>.

In fact, essentially elitist dismissals of the domestic *telenovela* could be found even before it became hegemonic. João Lopes, for example, no doubt spoke for many in his attack on one of the Portuguese productions shown in 1994 :

«Na Paz dos Anjos (Canal 1) is a new Portuguese *telenovela* which confirms a profound limitation of the bulk of audiovisual fiction (cinema included) which is made in our country: the absence of any relationship – whatever that might be – with the everyday realities of Portuguese life, with the variety and complexity of its types and relationships. Here, we never get beyond the most abject caricatural tone which is not even worthy of the inheritance of review theatre and its taste for the circulation of symbols and values. According to the promotional texts for Na Paz dos Anjos it will “portray present-day Portuguese reality in an entertaining way”. How, since there is no portrait, there is no formal work, entertainment is a lost treasure, the only reality is an imagined one, there are no grounds for mentioning Portugal and present day... what present day?»<sup>18</sup>.

Now that the local productions have ousted the Brazilian imports from the top of the ratings apparently for good, the alibi of cultural imperialism has been revealed for what it was and the elitist nature of these attacks is now out in the open. Outside the dedicated television magazines (where the discourse is always overwhelmingly positive) the domestic *novelas* are now written off in the same terms as their Brazilian counterparts were before – as stereotypical, shallow, repetitive, monotonous, lacking in originality. The fact that many Portuguese *novelas* are adaptations of texts originating elsewhere – a process by no means unique to Portugal, or to *telenovelas* – attracts frequent accusations of imitation rather than creation. A few examples will suffice to give a flavour of this critique :

«But the recent success of Anjo Selvagem and the continuation of Nunca Digas Adeus, both South American formats, reveal for the first time a breach in the factory: the authors. Adapting what has already been written is now the order of the day, a mission which has invented itself now imposes. Adapting is cheap, it's safe and has been "scientifically" tested. As it happens it has been successful in a part of the world where when one novela

17. H. O'DONNELL, *op. cit.* : 212.

18. J. LOPES, *op. cit.* : 106.

finishes another similar one comes along immediately, as if the genre took the form of constant repeats which don't even take the trouble to change the cast, far less the plot».

«Even Anjo Selvagem, an amusing little story, is irretrievably tendentious: the bosses are all crooks, corrupt, useless and alcoholics, with the exception of the worthy little granny, and the workers display exemplary rectitude (except for one female worker who, for a bit of variety, is having an affair with the boss)».(Diário de Notícias, 7 September 2002).

«Model T Industrial Prize 2001: for the mass production of *telenovelas* by the materials factories of António Perante for TVI. The products are the same, indistinguishable, which proves that the assembly line is working faultlessly, impeccably! Nunca Digas Adeus, Anjo Selvagem and Filha do Mar, what's the difference? They could be called Filha do Anjo, Nunca Digas Selvagem and Adeus, Mar», (*Público*, 31 December 2001).

«The fact that there are twins separated at birth in both TVI's *novela Olhos de Água* and in SIC's first *novela Ganância* seems ideally suited to convince us that both channels are the same, have the same strategy and even tell the same stories... It is in the *telenovela* that this kinship will be shown to be most profound» (*Público*, 16 April 2001).

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### The Empire Writes Back?

In order to be understood in all their complexity, these criticisms must, however, be seen as part of a much wider academic and intellectual unease at the changes which have been brought about in the Portuguese audiovisual landscape as a whole in the last decade by what is seen as an appeal to the «lowest common denominator» or the «sociological majority» and the loss of centrality of the kind of product – films, «serious» news, documentaries, literary adaptations, «healthy» entertainment and so on – which certain elements of the academic establishment have long seen as the only rightful claimants to prime-time placings. According to José Rebelo, for example, the new landscape has resulted in (among other things) the following :

«In the increase in the broadcasting of football matches... in the "*telenovela* war" where the viewer's attention is drawn to choosing between two similar products; in turning eroticism into something everyday; in the frequency of sensationalism, of the attention-grabbing, even through the appropriation of the shock-effect produced by the "gross"; in changes to the concept of newsworthiness, where authenticity and exclusiveness give way to the "discharge of adrenalin which news causes in the viewer"; in the desire to organise the spectacular, and to foreground those items of news with the greatest emotional charge»<sup>19</sup>.

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19. Quoted in A.P. FERNANDES, *op. cit.* : 67.

Many other examples of such views can be found with relative ease<sup>20</sup>.

While the triumph of the domestic *novela* can be seen from one point of view as the old seat of Empire overcoming the stigma of «reverse imperialism» and reasserting its own cultural autonomy, the critical discourse unmasked by this turn of event shows a different kind of empire building – or perhaps more correctly empire salvaging – at work. As Portugal enters its (belated) transition to postmodernity, the critiques mentioned above are the material expression of an (essentially doomed) attempt by sections of the academy and their supporters to cling to the values of a public sphere which was itself never fully formed in that country but which, at least in its idealised form, legitimises what they see as their role in society and valorises their acquired strengths. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues in his highly illuminating contribution to this field of study (though what he says of the eighties continues to be valid now) :

«The incessantly repeated denunciation of the degradation of cultural production in the overwhelming majority of universities gave rise, in the eighties, to the reaffirmation of the elitism of high culture and the legitimation of those educational policies designed to promote it»<sup>21</sup>.

Far from seeing products such as the *telenovela* as key sites of ideological negotiation between dominant and subaltern social groups, where important gains and concessions are made by both sides, the writers in question can see virtually nothing positive in programmes which, like the first episode of *A Jóia de África*, attract almost three million viewers. On the contrary, they typically view – or profess to view – what, following Umberto Eco (mostly via French analysts such as Dominique Wolton), they call «neo-television», as the «dictatorship of the majority», seeing it as a «danger for representative democracy» (this «democracy» is largely taken as a given, with few questioning how «representative» it may in reality be or not be, or whose interests it might actually «represent») and long for a return to the kind of values embodied in the «paleo-television» of yore which was premised on the foregrounding of their preferences. In a country with the lowest newspaper readership in Europe – the best-selling daily, the *Jornal de Notícias*, had a circulation of just over 100,000 in 1999 – where the main daily newspapers have become a forum where representatives of the political, cultural and academic establishment talk to each other while the bulk of the population pays little or no attention and finds its main sources of interest elsewhere, these discourses circulate endlessly in a self-perpetuating cycle of paranoia.

In the meantime, in the shifting alignments and recombinations of postmodernity, the *telenovela* writers, producers and actors, operating within a format which, as Milly Buonanno argues, «can take on and often acquires

20. Fernandes's book contains quotes from many Portuguese intellectuals making very similar points. Many others can be found in, for example, N.G. BRANDÃO's, *O Espectáculo das Notícias : a televisão generalista e a abertura dos telejornais*, Lisbon, Notícias Editorial, 2002. Similar sentiments can be found in A.M. De Melo MATOS's dissertation, *O Poder dos Media na Democracia Representativa*, written in the Universidade Lusíada in 2000 and available at <<http://paperpublisher.hypermart.net/papers/podermedia.htm>>.

21. B. De Sousa SANTOS, *Pela mão de Alice : o social e o político na pós-modernidade*, Oporto, Edições Afrontamento, 1994 : 169.

the status of a popular public sphere, where the most important socio-political questions of the moment are taken up and discussed»<sup>22</sup>, attract audience shares of at times over forty percent and, through their narratives, engage their viewers in an on-going and open-ended debate about many of the most pressing issues of contemporary Portuguese society.

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22. M. BUONANNO, *Le formule del racconto televisivo : la sovversione del tempo nelle narrative seriali*, Milan, Sansoni, 2002 : 138.

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