

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

The Melodrama Machine

Ilan Stavans

Amherst College, US
istavans@amherst.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

Reimagining Brazilian Television: Luiz Fernando Carvalho's Contemporary Vision. By Eli Lee Carter. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. Pp. x + 286. \$28.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822964988.

Frontera Verde. By Jenny Ceballos, Mauricio Leiva-Cock, and Diego Ramírez-Schrempf. Netflix, 2019. 8 episodes.

Foundational Films: Early Cinema and Modernity in Brazil. By Maite Conde. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. xiii + 306. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520290990.

Mock Classicism: Latin American Film Comedy, 1930–1960. By Nilo Couret. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 279. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520296855.

Roma. Written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Netflix, 2018.

Latin American Film Industries. By Tamara L. Falicov. London: Bloomsbury and British Film Institute, 2019. Pp. ix + 193. \$31.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781844573103.

Cosmopolitan Film Cultures in Latin America, 1896–1960. Edited by Rielle Navitski and Nicolas Poppe. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. Pp. xi + 376. \$38.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780253026460.

Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela. By Naomi Schiller. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 275. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478001447.

Bolívar. By Juana Uribe, María Clara Torres, Ricardo Aponte, and Leonor Sardi. Directed by Luis Alberto Restrepo, Andrés Beltrán, and Jaime Rayo. Netflix-Caracol Internacional, 2019. 63 episodes.

Capitán Latinoamérica: Superheroes in Cinema, Television, and Web Series. By Vinodh Venkatesh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020. Pp. xiii + 261. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781438480152.

Pues yo también soy perra y muerdo.
—Inés Vallejo, *Pecados ajenos* (2007)

Melodrama is foreign to any kind of understatement. It is indulgent and overly judgmental, giving the audience what it wants instead of teaching the audience to want something different. It traffics with the cheap emotions, rapidly combining tears and smiles, making them artificial, overindulgent. The melodrama hero is often vulnerable yet morally strong; the heroine naive, innocent, virginal. The action happens externally; it is presented at a dizzying speed, allowing barely enough time for it to be digested.

In the background, music emphasizes suspense. You come out of the melodrama satisfied but feeling dirty, impure. It's the same sensation one gets after eating cotton candy.

Of course, it is all designed to keep viewers hooked: the more fraught your feelings are, the more uptight you feel, the more successful the melodrama experience is. There is little regard for restraint because melodrama does everything to be cautious, superficial, predictable; it despises what Shakespeare, in *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 2), describes as the purpose of art: to be "a mirror up to nature." Melodrama doesn't mirror nature; it distorts it. It celebrates abandon and recklessness, and, although it hides behind a mask of morality, it indulges in promiscuity, if not physically at least imaginatively. It disregards intelligence in favor of instinct. It is intriguing that at its core melodrama dislikes parody because it is built as a stern, implacable, humorless board of human possibilities. These rambling thoughts are rather blunt. Truth is, in the twenty-first century melodrama has become richer, more diverse and nuanced. It is no longer the property of trashy pop culture because pop culture isn't trashy anymore; it has acquired an aura of respectability. I've always wondered if, with these changes, melodrama always needs to be understood in geographically specific ways. India's Bollywood industry, Mexican telenovelas, Japanese manga are all melodramatic yet each displays distinct cultural capital. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Quentin Tarantino, and Pedro Almodóvar have all experimented—profusely—with melodrama, each of them in his own unique way. They all cater to an urbane middle-class sensibility that deploys a culturally specific aperçu.

I'm an unrepentant lover of melodrama, not only as product but as a narrative modality. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is a multigenerational telenovela disguised as highbrow literature, as are Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in The Cathedral* (1969) and, obviously, *Aunt Julia and the Script Writers* (1977). Isabel Allende and Ángeles Mastretta aren't even interested in hiding that disguise. Manuel Puig loved melodrama, as is patent in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976) and all his other novels. Even classics like *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872) are, so to speak, *telenovelescos avant la lettre*. It makes sense that senators in Bogotá suspend their daily routine to watch the concluding episode of a *novela*, and that in times of the COVID-19 pandemic a popular *culebrón* in Havana, as telenovelas are sometimes called, cannot coincide with Communist Party meetings. In Buenos Aires, soccer games are scheduled, wisely, in coordination with prime-time soap opera producers, otherwise the government faces popular upheaval. Indeed, if there is a paradise exclusive to Latin Americans, it is likely to be a telenovela studio. Among Latino writers, Sandra Cisneros and Junot Díaz also trade with cheap sentimentality. I'm not saying anything new. As a domain, literature appears to cater to sophisticated sensibilities but in truth does the same: in order to achieve its objectives, it exaggerates.

I am of a generation that grew up watching telenovelas, sitcoms, and variety shows (*Siempre en domingo!* with Raúl Velasco, for instance), as well as reading comics and following superhero adventures. The menu of English-language programming dubbed into Spanish was plentiful. Personally, I found it less interesting than the local products, no matter how cheesy they were. This pertains to *los monitos*, *las tiras cómicas*, or *las tiras animadas*, all common appellations in the 1970s: the imports included *Batman*, *Superman*, *Archie and Sabrina*. The Spanish in which they were presented was a middle-of-the ground variety that allowed distributors to sell these items in Central America and elsewhere. I oscillated toward artifacts like *Kalimán*, *La familia Burrón*, *Mafalda*, and *Condorito*. And in spite of his anti-Semitic views, I loved Rius, whose illustrated booklets reflected on hot topics like colonialism, the rampant corruption of the political elite, and the Church's outright condemnation of abortion.¹ One could always count on coming across a character throwing a tantrum. Dishes would often fly around, fists would be at the ready, and tears would spill no matter what. The universe created by these narrative story lines made clear that the people in Latin America weren't always rational. Instead, they could be described as temperamental, if not to say volatile, establishing a dialogue with others through sentimentality.

Satirical TV shows like *Los Polivoces* and *El show del Loco Valdéz* used mordant humor to ridicule the contradictions of Mexico's daily politics. Although the production quality was low, they not only infused charm; they also had the temperature of what made Mexicans tick at that precise moment: a scandal, an earthquake, a world event seen from a local perspective. Every character was a caricature. In the 1970s Mexico was under a one-party-ruled dictatorship. No one doubted that the anesthetic effect of what was projected on the screen: decontextualized "indios," American cowboys, ignorant mestizos, *marihuana* beatniks, rapacious priests, and sexually repressed housewives. It was all stupefying, a fiesta of silliness designed to make human interaction look theatrical. Recent studies in Latin American popular culture are finally catching up with the frantic productivity of the period. Not only are comedians like Cantinflas and

¹ See my introduction to *Latino USA: A Cartoon History*, illustrated by Lalo Alcaraz (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Tin-Tan, whose careers evolved on the silver screen, regaining traction among scholars several decades after their death; with the access to archival material and the dissemination of old shows through streaming services, TV studies are also gaining momentum.

I was especially ambivalent about *Chespirito*, in retrospect the most important show to emerge on Mexican TV in the second half of the twentieth century.² The word “Chespirito” means “Little Shakespeare.” It is the stage name of comedian, screenwriter, director, and producer Roberto Gómez Bolaños (1929–2014). It is also the name of Gómez Bolaños’s weekly show, which ran, in various formats, from 1968 to 1995. The set of characters it displayed—El Doctor Chapatín, El Chavo del Ocho, El Chapulín Colorado, all starting with “ch”—are stereotypes. Their reactions are crude: they cry, laugh, get angry, and explore in tantrums evidence the target audience isn’t educated. Yet their emotional metabolism mimics that of Mexico overall: compassionate, endearing, even selfless. We Mexicans are often told, when people find out our provenance, “*ah, la tierra del chavo*,” el chavo’s homeland. For better or worse, he and Cantinflas are our biggest contemporary icons. For years I’ve imagined a kind of fake autobiography *through* Chespirito, one that surveys the topography of Latin America by exploring the effects of melodrama.

Consequently, I cherish the release of the thought-provoking volume *Capitán Latinoamérica: Superheroes in Cinema, Television, and Web Series*, by Vinodh Venkatesh. Chespirito created a panoply of types (one might prefer to describe them as stereotypes) that live in the imagination of hundreds of millions of people. In his analysis, Venkatesh is only interested in the anti-heroics of *El Chapulín Colorado*, not in other Chespirito creations: Mexico’s El Santo and Blue Demon, Argentina’s Zenitram, Colombia’s El Man, Capitán Centroamérica, Chile’s Mirageman, Honduras’s Chiche Man, and so on. These aren’t champions exclusively adored by children; their fan base is large among adults, proof that in the pantheon of nationalism today such characters serve a broad psychological function: they create the illusion that one’s country has its metabolism, if not also its mechanisms of self-immolation. All, or almost all, these creations are satirical. They would never be able to stop an invading army. What they are able to do is make readers forget their misery by poking fun at the status quo. Venkatesh divides these characters into three distinct archetypes: the Anglo superhero, the wrestler as superhero, and the parodic hero par excellence. Their names, and sometimes their overall language, uses Spanglish. The parodic hero, a kind of *pícaro*, is the category where El Chapulín Colorado fits in. “Unlike hegemonic incarnations,” Venkatesh, who teaches at Virginia Tech, argues that “Latin American superheroes are deeply entrenched in their national contexts, playing out and meditating on critical ethical, political, social, and economic issues” (213). He adds: “[he] challenges systems of power, injustice, and the law.” It might be added that this pantheon of icons is always male. It is also the opposite of dispassionate; on the contrary, it thrives in arousing in the audience explosive reactions.

In my career as a melodrama aficionado, I have been particularly interested in telenovelas.³ I like to compare them with Ulysses’s journey in *The Odyssey*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and Voltaire’s *Candide*. How does the hero fare in his adventures? To what extent is the viewer manipulated? What is the message about the moral health of society in general? Any of these genres could be considered a melodrama machine. The output from Latin America in these realms is breathtaking. Each nation has its own well-defined pantheon of characters, maybe even a discrete style, though some (Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina) are substantially more industrious than others. In fact, Latin American melodrama is one of the region’s lucrative exports, watched assiduously—with subtitles—in the Arab world and in Israel, Africa, the countries of the former Soviet bloc, and Asia. Those of us who have watched telenovelas mature in the last few decades know they are miscellaneous in style and content: some are trite while others are experimental; the majority deal with issues of class, gender, and race in contemporary settings, but more than a few have historical breadth, reimagining the past in daring fashion.

My infatuation with telenovelas often makes me wonder if they are on the verge of creating a *Don Quixote*, a product that saves them in the eyes of posterity while simultaneously refuting their most manipulative premises. This is palpable in *Reimagining Brazilian Television: Luis Fernando Carvalho’s Contemporary Vision*, a pathbreaking study by Eli Lee Carter. Carvalho is a genius in the art of cross-pollination. Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1960, he is an avant-garde, restless filmmaker and TV director in pursuit of experimentation. His

² See my op-ed “What Chespirito Left Us,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2014. I find delightful the homonymous coincidences between Roberto Gómez Bolaños and Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003), author of *The Savage Detectives* (1998) and *2666* (2004). While diametrically different in their existential vision and aesthetic approach, their use of archetypes, prototypes, and stereotypes is similar. Bolaño lived in Mexico (1968–1973 and 1974–1977) at the height of Chespirito’s popularity.

³ My obsession is anchored in biography: my father was a telenovela star; he also acted in *El Chavo del Ocho* and other Mexican shows. I’ve written about him in *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (New York: Viking, 2001), among other places. His career is seen retrospectively in my one-man play *Kaddish for My Father; or, Why We Lie* (2020).

meditations on his nation's classics—Machado de Assis, Clarice Lispector, and Graciliano Ramos, to name a few—are nothing if not thought-provoking. He works with poems, plays, scripts, and other materials. His debut was with *A espera* (1986), adapted from Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (1977). Audiences outside of Brazil are unlikely to have been exposed to him. For that reason, Carter's study, while typically obfuscating in its graduate-school argot, is nonetheless worth the effort. Carvalho's most incisive work might be for television. He has done telenovelas and miniseries with TV Globo, as well as micro-series. In other words, he has been ready to turn the tradition upside down. His first *novela* was *Helena* (1987). It was followed by almost two dozen. Others include *Renascença* (Rebirth, 1993), *Os Maias* (The Maias, 2001, based on the homonymous novel [1888] by Eça de Queirós), *Hoje é dia de Maria* (Today Is Maria's Day, 2005), the deliberately artificial *Meu pedacinho de chão* (My Little Plot of Land, 2014),⁴ and *Dois irmãos* (Two Brothers, 2017). Carvalho had made some of the most successful Brazilian telenovelas ever.

Nurturing a love-and-hate relationship with TV, he is extraordinary in his conceptions. He proves that telenovelas are fertile ground for aesthetic exploration. Carter compares him to Stanley Kubrick and Woody Allen. A more fitting resemblance would be either South African performance artist William Kentridge (*The Magic Flute*, *Wozzeck*) or Belgian theater director Ivo van Hove (*Antigone*, *Three Sisters*, *West Side Story*), though more daring than them in his travels across genres. Carvalho erases the boundaries between a traditional *novela* and a Netflix-like miniseries. He is also an auteur in that his name is attached to his work, no matter if a staff is behind it at well. In his conclusion, called "Reimagining the (Anti)Telenovela," Carter meditates on Carvalho's ongoing feeling of suffocation when he works for TV and how the metrics of companies like TV Globo aren't quite ready for an innovator of his kind. In discussing the role of advertising as well as audience sizes in products that are less than conventional, Carter suggests that the spaces for such an adventurous talent are rather confined. In fact, the career of such uniquely endowed artist is likely to be include a generous portion of wasted energy fighting management, bureaucrats, and advertising sponsors. In that sense, Carvalho is the exception rather than the rule, since he doesn't confine himself to strict forms. He experiments with narrative. He looks at acting in innovative ways; and his camera work makes him a vanguardist. Carter quotes a critic who, while not naming Carvalho, alienates talents such as his: "A telenovela is a feuilletonistic story with romance, with comedy, with drama, that entices the spectator to tune in every day. It has a hook before every commercial break and a strong hook at the end of every chapter. This is what the telenovela is and this is how it has been done. Anything that goes against these characteristics does not work. So if you do not like the telenovela, go make a miniseries, series, or do something else" (246). The history of art—meaningful, transcendental art—is the history of its agitations. Although figures like Carvalho don't come on a regular basis, when they do the echoes are long-lasting. No one would describe the Latin American telenovela as other than a conservative endeavor, since, for all its seditiousness, at its heart it distrusts freedom as a human principle, choosing conformity instead. Yet the sheer frenzy with which the tradition assembles new products means that it exists in a state of alertness, eager to outdo itself at all times.

Transgressions aside, the best Latin American telenovelas might be superb; the worst—as in most cases—happily forgettable. That they require enormous investment on the part of the viewership speaks to their appeal: a typical telenovela might last between fifty and a hundred episodes, although there are some that are mercifully shorter and others tormenting in their ambition. Then again, Charles Dickens's serialized novels in British papers (such as *The Old Curiosity Shop*) ran, with their addictive cliff-hangers, for years without readers raising a peep. Less frantically, so did Benito Pérez Galdós's in Spain. I'm still savoring *Roma* (2018), the much-lauded Oscar-winning film by Alfonso Cuarón that at heart is a conventional melodrama. It isn't, strictly speaking, a telenovela. Some might even decry my lumping it with other melodramas. It is careful to delineate the various realms of sentimentality it explores, instead of conflating them. But it is histrionic, by which I mean over-sentimental. That suits me well because I'm sure that Mexico isn't accidentally the capital of melodrama. On the contrary, the fact that some of the most famous telenovelas have been produced there is a testament to the country's endless exultation of sentimentality. No wonder we Mexicans were the first to call telenovelas *culebrones*, in honor of their serpentine narratives, which aren't too different from those defining our own life.

And so, among the many praises I will lavish on *Roma* is calling it *melodramática*, not in the pejorative sense but as a celebration of its sentimentality. The story of Cleo, an indigenous maid in an upper middle-class Mexico City neighborhood borrows shamelessly from telenovelas: a family of four children with a devout mother and a disloyal father, whose true link with the world is the *servienta*, herself fooled by a tyrannical lover involved in fascist activities in the 1970s. There's an unwanted pregnancy and an averted

⁴ This Carvalho *novela* reminds me of Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011).

tragedy on the beach, all told from the maid's savvy, untarnished perspective. You could easily turn it into a twenty-episode narrative. Cuarón, however, restrains himself from overindulgence: he emphasizes feelings without looking down at his characters, particularly Cleo. The triumph in his approach lies in his conviction that human interactions are unpredictable even when they are volatile. The film, as a creative piece, emerged from Mexico City's pop cultural landscape: songs by American shows like *Lost in Space* (1965–1968), the TV sitcom of “El Loco” Valdés, songs by Juan Gabriel, Rocío Dúrcal, Leo Dan, and Acapulco Tropical. Cuarón himself is the sure-handed cinematographer, making every frame a treat to the eye that recalls Italian Neorealist films like Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (1945) as well as Swedish philosophical investigations such as Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957). Likewise, the telenovela sensibility is everywhere: in the way Cleo relates to the other housemaid; in the reaction the children have to their father's unexplained long travels. Cuarón knows that melodrama ought to be not avoided but embraced with a modicum of reverence. The fact that Netflix, whose success in the business includes Colombia's remix of *Sin senos sí hay paraíso* (2016; a recycling, or maybe an extension, of *Sin senos no hay paraíso* [2008]) and Mexico's bio-epic *Luis Miguel* (2018), is the producer of *Roma* and that it distributes it worldwide highlights, and maybe complicates, these consonances.

The roots of telenovelas not only in Mexico but in Latin America go back to black-and-white TV in the fifties. They sprang out of not only autochthonous serialized novels (think Corín Tellado) but also the radio serials with labyrinthine plots and an abundant, improbable cast of characters. In the urban landscape an emergent middle class adored them, appreciating what it witnessed on the sound waves as a palliative to modern alienation. The jump from radio to TV, while technologically adventurous, was seamless in terms of appeal: it was pleasant to pin down those voices, to see who they belonged to. At first, telenovelas in Mexico, still the most audacious epicenter of creativity, used the same radio actors. But the public quickly built a fandom around the beautiful faces that consistently visited them in their living rooms. In no time the telenovela industry exploded beyond the wildest dreams. Today each nation (such as Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Peru, Venezuela, and so on) proudly showcases its own tradition, producing local stories for local markets that also travel across international borders.

Not long ago, I spent an entire semester with about twenty-five bright, insightful students exploring Latin American melodrama as it pertains to telenovelas. We compared the Colombian version of *Rosario Tijeras* (2010, based on a novel by Jorge Franco) to its Mexican counterpart (2016); marveling at the divergent paths the first and second season of *La reina del sur* (2011, 2019, inspired in a semi-journalistic novel by Arturo Pérez Reverte), with the atrocious Kate del Castillo; and wondering if there is a difference, in the twenty-first century, between formats like *Rebelde* (2004) and Netflix-made *Club de cuervos* (2015), about a soccer team in an invented northern Mexican town; *La casa de las flores* (2018), about a *florería* and the Chekhovian family that owns it; and the detective-driven *Frontera verde* (2019). The quality is immensely different. For one thing, the financial equation is night and day: for every thousand dollars invested by Televisa, Mexico's mega TV company, in an average episode, the largesse of Netflix puts in a hundred times the amount.

The COVID-19 pandemic has glued us like automatons to the small screen. Streaming platforms (Netflix, HBO, Hulu, Disney+, etc.) aren't only in desperate need of content; they have also become shrewd in their globalist aspirations. The ubiquitous consumption of storytelling means there is a new show available almost every day. Netflix has been audacious in its embrace of telenovelas. Its strategy is intriguing: it invests in local talent as long as it judges it capable of traveling across borders.⁵ To achieve this feat, it depends on subtitling while also dubbing narratives for discerning consumers. Most are in English but are made anywhere on the planet and display linguistic specificity: Danish, French, Italian, Spanish, Korean—the options are plentiful. The age when one waited to visit an art house to be exposed to foreignness is gone. Although there are original series made in multiple languages, Spanish is one of Netflix's most coveted markets. In any case, the series listed above and other recent Netflix products (Hulu, HBO Go, Disney Plus, and other platforms are still behind in discovering the power of the Spanish-language telenovela market) are an invitation to survey the terrain.

In sharp contrast to *Roma* is *Bolívar* (2019), a sixty-three-episode saga, also on Netflix, made in Colombia about the maverick career of *libertador* Simón Bolívar. Whereas Cuarón's intention is to surgically dissect the lives of a group of vulnerable characters, the creators of this sleep-inducing national—and nationalistic—exploration of the forces behind the South American independence moment led by strong-willed, upper-class men fails to do what a good telenovela knows is unavoidable: hold the viewer's attention. The actors

⁵ See Mercedes Medina, “Hispanic Media Globalization,” in *Communications Media, Globalization, and Empire*, edited by Oliver Boyd-Barrett (Bloomington: distributed by Indiana University Press, 2007), 164–182.

do the best they can with a predictable script that at times seems to lift entire sections from the unwieldy Wikipedia entry on Bolívar. Over the years, I have seen dozens of historical telenovelas, some dealing with Mexico's age of independence, Brazil's slavery, and so on. The parameters the genre establishes are seldom conducive to engaging narratives. The scriptwriters always appear to be under duress, regimented to teach history to the audience while also humanizing famous figures. It is a doomed task and Bolívar is a perfect example. An innovator like Luiz Fernando Carvalho is needed. But then such innovations run counter to the set ideas of what a standard telenovela should be.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Netflix experience is the alternative availability of subtitled and dubbed versions. This is an aspect I'm attracted to: each Latin American telenovela is delivered in its own local parlance, which is a feast for linguistics.⁶ Indeed, a study of the Spanish varieties has become incalculably easier thanks to the streaming portal. *Bolívar* is delivered in pseudo-nineteenth-century jargon, including that of black slaves, landowners, Argentine outlaws, and so on. In contrast, serials like *Frontera verde*, also a Colombian product, though this one is set in the Amazon, features various types of the nation's Spanish along with indigenous tongues like Witotoan and, given that the action takes place not far from the Brazilian border, Brazilian Portuguese. English and French are also in the mix. In seeking to globalize its profits, Netflix has developed a school of crafty translators whose task it is to convey meaning in all its complexity.⁷ Fortunately, we are far from the mechanical rendering that was the norm in the movie industry in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century, in which every Spanish from the twenty Latin American countries was approached in the same way. The current approach seeks to be more specific. Still, the dilemma between subtitles and dubbing remains. While more accurate, subtitling is still unable to catch every linguistic gradation, as is evident in *Frontera verde*, where variations in the Amazonian accent elude the effort. I doubt this inefficacy is surmountable. After all, translation is an approximation. Dubbing is far more dislocating, injecting a foreignness that is disorienting.

There is an important middle-grown director in the realm of telenovelas, whom I met years ago: Miguel Sabido. Trained in theater (he was born in 1937 and worked closely with the mogul Emilio Azcárraga), he is an influential theoretician, especially important in acting circles. In the 1970s, he developed what came to be known as "the Sabido method," a strategy he uses to develop telenovelas with a strong social message that actually have an impact on people's comportment. He develops focus groups through which an important issue—alcoholism or domestic violence, for example—is discussed in depth. Participants in these groups suggest real-life scenes. Sabido and his team subsequently convert the material into narratives with identifiable characters. In other words, rather than imagining a series from scratch, the Sabido approach is to root the origins of any project in collective storytelling. He has been enormously successful. For instance, Sabido's *Acompañame* (1977–1978) was linked to the government's campaign for family planning among the working class. It has been shown that, after watching the telenovela, more than half a million Mexican women enrolled in family planning clinics. Other telenovelas where his method was used include *El combate* (1980), about adults who go back to school; *Caminemos* (1980–1981), on adolescent sex education; and *Los hijos de nadie* (1997–1998), about homeless children. I'm not aware of any book-length study on Miguel Sabido, though he certainly deserves one. Melodrama, in his case, is used in ideological, non-pamphleteering ways. He is frequently accused of being a government collaborator. This is true. He doesn't come from a left-leaning position; instead, he looks at telenovelas as tools for practical change. Sabido's model is the opposite of Carvalho. Whereas Carvalho is interested in aesthetic novelty, style isn't a priority for Sabido. On the surface, his telenovelas are straightforward, mechanical, and unassuming—that is to say, forgettable. Yet their agency is substantial.

I mentioned the Latin American film industry. Given its ubiquity, TV has far more agency. From bedrooms to classrooms, from restaurants to gyms, in urban centers everywhere, not excluding Latin America, it is difficult to escape its gaze. No matter at what time of day you turn it on, you are in the middle of a story. Actually, you *are* the story, since watching the small screen defines our every action. So much so that studies have been done to explore the self-consciousness people experience when interacting in regular ways—walking in the park, pumping gasoline, shopping for groceries—because our conduct is modeled in attitudes TV feeds us with. All this has turned cinema into a niche endeavor. We might go to the movies to escape not only life itself but the omnipresent, global embrace of TV. Furthermore, in the audience's mind what happens on

⁶ I dream of writing a full-fledged book about telenovelas. See my article "Teaching Telenovelas," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2013, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-telenovelas/>.

⁷ Tessa Dwyer, "Sub/Dub Wars: Attitudes to Screen Translation," in *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 19–51.

television *is real*, even if it was all concocted, simply because the public saw it, it was acknowledged, there's a record of it. This rifeness is directly linked to emotions. As people see yet another expression of overwrought emotions on a telenovela, they themselves experience it vicariously in personal ways. Movies, in contrast, position themselves more tenuously, as stories that happen elsewhere. They are easier to ignore and faster to forget. In that sense, they are less effective as tools for change. In the past few decades, scholarly studies of the Latin American film industry have been abundant. In comparison, telenovelas are an absolute desert in terms of scholarship. The reasons are multifold. Their length is prohibitive. Until recently, so was watching time and again an entire series. Then there's the issue of authorship. More than created, these artifacts are packaged. Depending on the length, a series might have between four to twenty directors.⁸ Scriptwriters are also replaceable, never leaving an individualized print. The result is a hodgepodge, a summation that feels as if done by committee. In spite of the absence of valuable scholarship—none of the books under review is about telenovelas, although they provide collateral knowledge—I have chosen to frame this essay around it as a call to arms. Latin American melodrama is an invaluable tool and TV has reached a maturity long aspired.

To suggest that the telenovela machine is a direct descendant of filmmaking is to state the obvious. More nuanced would be to assert what kind of movies. The answer, at least unequivocally, is the so-called Golden Age of Mexican cinema, roughly considered to have occurred between Fernando de Fuentes's *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (1935) and Ismael Rodríguez's *Tizoc* (1957), or perhaps Luis Buñuel's *Nazarín* (1958). In between were years of stunning productivity—before, during, and after World War II—that featured stars like Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Pilar Pellicer, Katy Jurado, Sara García, and Rita Macedo, and launched the careers of Gabriel Figueroa, Emilio “El Indio” Fernández, and Arcady Boytler. And legendary comedians such as Cantinflas (real name Mario Moreno), whose behavioral patterns as “*el peladito*” reconfigured Mexican culture.⁹ The aesthetics of the Cine de Oro, with its interest in the clash between classes, genders, and ethnicities, coincided with the ascendance of the telenovela as a Latin American commodity. The book *Latin American Film Industries* by Tamara L. Falicov, written in surgical language and released under the aegis of the British Film Institute, is a valuable resource to survey the role that state and private funding, as well as distribution, have played in the making of films in the region. Since to the best of my knowledge no equivalent exists on telenovelas, it is worth imagining a counterpart.

The volume edited by Rielle Navitski and Nicolas Poppe, *Cosmopolitan Film Cultures in Latin America, 1896–1960*, is strange yet refreshing. It combines translations of mostly little-known, path-opening newspaper and magazine pieces, some of them anonymous, about the impact of movies in the continent, such as “The Lumière Cinematograph,” published in Mexico City's *El Monitor Republicano* on August 16, 1896; Octávio de Faria's “Russian Cinema and Brazilian Cinema,” in Rio de Janeiro's *O Fan*, in October 1928; Guillermo de Torre's “The ‘Cineclub’ of Buenos Aires,” in Madrid's *La Gaceta Literaria*, April 1, 1930; and Gabriel García Márquez's “The Mambo,” in Barranquilla's *El Heraldo*, on January 12, 1951. Along with high-caliber material purposely composed for the book, they explore the crossroads of nationalism, modernization, and globalization, expressly as it related to the struggle by Latin American national film traditions against the Hollywood behemoth. There are terrific pieces on early Colombian cinema between 1916 and 1920, examinations of US Spanish-language film magazines and their impact on Latin American audiences between the First and Second World Wars, an analysis of the bridge between Cuban cinema and that nation's educational enterprises under Fidel Castro's regime, and a fascinating piece on Chicano sci-fi, in what its author, Colin Gunckel, calls “Aztec horror in mid-century Mexico” (334), a type of “bad cinema” that is actually a precious thermometer to understand the temperature of Mexican culture when it comes to its conflicted mestizo identity. Cheap and forgettable, that cinema is the type that Tarantino and his friend Robert Rodriguez have turned upside down, inviting us to describe it as avant-garde today. They have done it by decontextualizing it, injecting it with a multimillion-dollar budget.

In the near future, I look forward to a similar anthology focused on telenovelas, perhaps with an emphasis on the tempestuous world of emotions in Latin America. There are abundant reactions to early productions that discuss content, style, and technics. From the eighties onward, specialty periodicals sold in newsstands, supermarkets, and restaurants, geared toward a popular audience, regularly reflect on the impact of fleeting starlets and fashionable shows. The intersection of globalism and nationalism might be an equally compelling

⁸ Among other topics, I discuss packaging with Mexican telenovela director Benjamín Cann: “Televisar las emociones,” *Turia*, May 2020, http://www.ieturolenses.org/revista_turia/index.php/actualidad_turia/televisar-las-emociones (accessed August 9, 2020).

⁹ See my essay “The Riddle of Cantinflas,” in *The Riddle of Cantinflas: Essays on Hispanic Popular Culture*, rev. and expanded ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

starting point. Mexico's Televisa and Brazil's TV Globo sell their appealing merchandize to distributors in Russia, Egypt, Poland, South Korea, Israel, and scores of other markets. This offers an enviable window for others to appraise Latin American culture.

Telenovelas are also a valuable resource in teaching Spanish. I have come across scores of nonnative speakers in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Arab world whose entrance to the language took place by watching *novelas* on TV. And, as stated before, numerous series travel from one country to another, opening up unforeseen comparative vistas that distinguished between local themes and approaches. Plus, there is the already abundant subgenre of *narconovelas*, obsessed with US-Latin American relations—diplomatic, military, and drug-related—and figures like Pablo Escobar, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, and other tribal lords (male and female, as in the cases of *Rosario Tijeras* and *La reina del sur*). Putting aside the prudishness (*pudor*, in Spanish) faculty might have about hypersexualized bodies and ubiquitous violence—What is better, ignoring or acknowledging these demeaning aspects of Latin America in front of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds who are arriving for the first time to Spanish as a language? Aren't they already overly exposed to these dimensions, by sheer cultural osmosis?—telenovelas are as real a window to reality as one might be able to get.

Two of the books under review deal with Brazil. I reflected on the first one, about Luiz Fernando Carvalho, earlier in this essay. As its title suggests, the second one, Maite Conde's *Foundational Films: Early Cinema and Modernity in Brazil* (the title seems stolen from a foundational book on literature by Doris Sommer), is about depictions of modernity on the silver screen. This, unmistakably, is a chic academic topic. How did Latin America come to be what it is? How were foreign influences processed along the way? What was embraced and what was dismissed? Since moviemaking is a tangible media, it is possible to qualify modernity in exact terms. Conde looks at film and fandom (another hot topic) in *Cinearte* magazine, explores Humberto Mauro's *Lost Treasure* (1927) and the expedition films of Major Luiz Thomaz Reis, and devotes a section to the titillating documentary *São Paulo, A Metropolitan Symphony* (1929), inspired by a similar exploration of Berlin. She is curious about the way the medium transformed Brazil and the other way around. It is in the spirit of Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (1902), frequently translated into English as *Rebellion in the Backlands*, which, by the way, would make a thrilling telenovela. Works of art are never virtuous; they convey the *Weltanschauung* that gave them birth as seen from the skewed vision of the future.

In connection with documentaries, Naomi Schiller's *Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela* zooms, with an ethnographic eye, into the activities of Catia TVe, a prominent television station started in 2000 by activists connected with the Hugo Chávez regime. It features political speeches as well as an assortment of community claims that seek to give media representation to the average Venezuelan. Expectedly, the outcomes Schiller finds as a result of a variety of interviews and other research showcase the fractured, benignant nature of the project. In spite of the country's severe financial crisis, which has been in decline for a couple of decades, the state-run TV of Chavez—and his second-rate clone, Nicolás Maduro—has ventured into telenovela production. The government-made products are promoted as a substitute to the “capitalist,” that is, commercial, vision of Venevisión, which, according to Maduro, disseminates values antithetical to *Bolivarismo*. On their face value, those *novelas* are quite retrograde. The character development, already limited in an average *culebrón*, in these state artifacts is put to the service of mindless ideology, making them mouthpieces for larger revolutionary goals. For this sold-out bourgeois viewer, they are simply unwatchable. The same goes for telenovelas produced under Cuba's Communism. They are trite and inconsequential. Interestingly, that isn't the case a bunch of Cuban films of the sixties, from Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Historias de la revolución* (Histories of the Revolution, 1960), *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment, 1968), and *Fresa y chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate, 1993), to Humberto Solás's *Lucía* (1968), and Pastor Vega's *Retrato de Teresa* (Portrait of Teresa, 1979). While framed within unambiguous ideological parameters, these directors managed to create lasting works of art.

Nilo Couret's reinvigorating *Mock Classicism: Latin American Film Comedy, 1930–1960* is about the use of space and time in the work of Cantinflas, Brazil's popular Oscarito (full name Oscar Lorenzo Jacinto de la Imaculada Concepción Teresa Dias) and Grande Otelo (Sebastião Bernardes de Souza Prata), and Argentina's Niní Marshall (Marina Esther Traveso) and Luis Sandrini. This theoretical book examines the culture of *el relajo* in Mexico, the Brazilian *chanchadas*, and other similar comedic manifestations in the region as forms of subversion. Again, I read it against another formulation: the reality that Latin American telenovelas also “mock” different genres. In fact, telenovelas, in my estimation, display what I call “an inflected rebellion.” They cater to a public that is tired of governmental inefficiencies, ingrained social racism, an irredeemable police force regularly engaging in brutality, and other endemic problems. These artifacts offer a severe systemic critique of the status quo. However, they do so without offering radical alternatives. Instead, their palliative

is not unlike what Cantinflas, *chanchadas*, and other humor makers provide: temporary distraction. Again, that distraction isn't innocent; it builds on ages of dissent by telling a hypnotized audience what it wants to hear. It lampoons social types, generating predictable emotional reactions. Melodrama invites people to suffer together. That suffering is only marginally about one's own setting; the expiation melodrama orchestrates is a ritual of fake emotions. It also matters that *novelas* come in a whole array of forms. Some are historical, addressing periods of a nation's past, others are documentarian, a few might be comedic, and there might be some that are designed with the objective to educate on a particular subject. It is a well-known fact, for instance, that in the eighties the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) made a deal with Televisa, with the consent of its most famous news anchor Jacobo Zabludovsky, to strategize a subliminal campaign whose purpose was to decrease the country's birth rate. Other telenovelas, not only in Mexico but in Brazil and Colombia, have gone out against the Catholic Church on topics like abortion. Or they have exposed domestic abuse. And they have exposed corruption.

Even more than film, TV is a byzantine media. Everything in it is subjected to ratings. Ratings must follow the laws of the free market: what sells is green-lighted—as simple as that. In state-run channels, bureaucracies function as rating qualifiers: if the content of a series is deemed to follow the party line, budgets follow soon after. Caring for style is therefore inconsequential. At the same time, television has enormous influence. Its connection with power is therefore of enormous consequence. Proof of this are the nightmarish Trump years in the United States. Like Peronismo in Argentina and Chavismo in Venezuela, the echoes are long-lasting. Trump is a melodrama master. A disrupter at heart, he flourishes in orchestrating chaos, especially in the emotional realm. It is impossible to be indifferent toward him: you either love him or hate him. The same goes for egomaniac leaders anywhere, including Latin America. I have no doubt some cultures are more prone to melodrama than others. The questions at hand, at least in my view, are the role it plays in specific historical periods, and if, as a result of the expanding presence of media in people's life, melodrama, not on screen but in reality, remains a constant or if it increases and decreases depending on predictable factors.

Thus, to say that people in Latin America in the twenty-first century act like characters in a telenovela isn't a cliché. This is unavoidable: if you are taught on TV, time and again, to feed on heightened sentimentality, it isn't surprising you'll act in melodramatic ways whenever your romantic relationship touches certain nerves, or when the family dynamic goes over the edge. Lambasting melodrama as the opium of the people is easy; anyone can do it. The harder part is to look at melodrama conscientiously, to understand its roots, its sedative allure. The engine behind it is cutthroat commercialism, but that's only one side of it. The melodramatic imagination fulfills a psychological function: it makes us feel alive artificially by pumping over-the-top scenes as if they were shots of espresso. The resulting state is comparable to steroids. It allows us to recognize that as crude and miserable as life might be, people in general, regardless of their educational level, aren't alone. Their suffering is replicated by others—tangibly, without facades. Melodrama turns emotions into marketable items. When daily affairs seem too boring, it infuses our attention with suspense by concentrating, injecting meaning into a universe that otherwise might seem meaningless.

Author Information

Ilan Stavans is Lewis-Sebrin Professor of Humanities and Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College. His latest books are *A Pre-Columbian Bestiary: Fantastic Creatures of Indigenous Latin America* and a retelling of the *Popol Vuh* (both 2020) as well as *Selected Translations: Poems, 2000–2020* (2021).

How to cite this article: Stavans, Ilan. 2021. The Melodrama Machine. *Latin American Research Review* 56(1), pp. 269–277. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1496>

Submitted: 08 September 2020

Accepted: 14 December 2020

Published: 09 March 2021

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LARR

Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 