

The Genre "Telenovela" and the Female Notion of Time

By Michele Mattelart

Danish Summary: Michele Mattelarts udgangspunkt er, at der indenfor medieforskningen internationalt set har fundet en udvikling sted fra den ideologi-kritiske analyse, hvor seeren betragtes som passiv, til en øget interesse for reception af medieprodukterne. Hvilket forhold er der mellem medieteksten og modtagerens oplevelse af denne - afhængig af sociale, kulturelle, individuelle, gruppe- og klassemæssige forskelle?

Karakteristisk for både den amerikanske "soap opera" og den sydamerikanske "telenovella" er, at de har et narrativt forløb, som udvikler sig over lange perioder. De senere års TV-udvikling med det stigende behov for fiktionsprogrammer har fremmet behovet for både nordamerikansk og sydamerikansk fiktion.

Det er Michele Mattelarts tese, at der er en sammenhæng mellem kvinders 'usynlige' arbejde i hjemmet og deres forkærlighed for en genre som "telenovella"en. Generelt er der i samfundet en høj vurdering af mandens lønnede arbejde og en lav vurdering af kvindens ulønnede arbejde i hjemmet, og medierne beskriver traditionelt husarbejde og børnepasning som kvinders "naturlige" område og pligt. Det er imidlertid anderledes i soap-operaerne og i telenovellaerne. Deri er intimsfæren positivt vurderet og beskrevet på kvinders præmisser - bestemt af 'kærlighed' og 'følelser'.

I sit arbejde i Chile blev Michele Mattelart overrasket over modsætningen mellem på den ene side revolutionær og kritisk bevidsthed og på den anden side kvindernes fascination af de melodramatiske telenovellaer. Kvinder, som var i besiddelse af en rationel indsigt, blev fascinerede ved at se episoder i telenovellaerne, der på traditionel vis berørte dagligdagen, kærligheden etc.

Michele Mattelart understreger, at man som forsker bliver nødt til at interessere sig for de industrielle kulturprodukters popularitet og den glæde, de giver modtagerne, og det er på det grundlag, hun opstiller sine hypoteser. Hun har i "The Myth of Modernity" (Women, Media and Crisis, Femininity and Disorder. Co-media. London 1986) skrevet følgende:

"Den mytiske antagonisme mellem begrebet 'kvindelighed' og begrebet 'forandring' kan utvivlsomt føres tilbage til, at der i alle kulturer associeres mellem 'kvinder' og elementer som 'vand' og 'jord' - synonymer for 'frugtbarhed', 'det evige'. Billedet af kvinden er knyttet til fortsættelse, forplantning og varighed".

Over for historieforståelsens traditionelle tidsbegreb, der opererer med brud, krise og kaos som kilde til forandring, opstilles det 'kvindelige' tidsbegreb, en cyklisk kvindelighed, en flydende tidsfornemmelse, hvori indgår hjemmet, ægteskabet og moderskabet. Det er denne forestilling om en mytisk kvindelighed, karakteriseret ved gentagelse og evighed, som slår igennem i TV-historierne i telenovellaerne. Hvor mændene er handlingsorienterede og med til at forandre historien, er kvinderne det ikke, men falder ind i de mytiske forestillinger.

I telenovellaerne præsenteres stumper fra hverdagen, som er genkendelige for kvinder ud fra deres erfaringsverden, men Michele Mattelart er af den opfattelse, at når dette 'kvindelige' tidsbegreb dyrkes i de nævnte TV-genrer, tjener det til at fastholde kvinderne i det traditionelle mønster, således at de ikke får del i de 'mandlige' tidsprocesser, præget af handling, og således at de ikke får redskaber til at orientere sig i mændenes verden.

Ved at inddrage det 'kvindelige' tidsbegreb i forhold til kvindens fascination af telenovellaen bliver to aflæsninger imidlertid mulige: En mulig aflæsning er at pege på/fremhæve fremmedgørelsen, det undertrykkende ved at kvinder fortsat bliver fastholdt af mytiske forestillinger - i det givne tilfælde det 'kvindelige' tidsbegreb. En anden mulig aflæsning er at fremhæve det alternative/positive ved kvinders modstand mod det tidsbegreb, som præger det udviklede kapitalistiske samfund med dets krav om effektivitet og handling. Sociale bevægelser er også teoretiske bevægelser, som får stadig større betydning - og der er i de senere år sket en udvikling hen imod en lavere prioritering af målrettet karriere-orientering.

Med denne udvikling, præget af en ny følsomhed, sker der en oprioritering af de værdier, kvindearbejdet repræsenterer, det kvindelige tidsbegreb etc. Set i lyset af den opfattelse er den anden aflæsning således en mulighed.

Som led i den nævnte udvikling er kvinderne i øjeblikket i færd med at opvurdere - og at få opvurderet - deres specifikke erfaringer, og de søger at definere sig selv ud fra den kønsmæssige forskellighed. Det er forskelle, som er knyttet til psykologiske, biologiske og seksuelle forskelle, og som traditionelt set er blevet brugt til fremmedgørelse og undertrykkelse af kvinder.

Det er spændende at konstatere, mener Michele Mattelart, at den beskrevne søgen blandt kvinder synes at finde paralleller vedrørende udforskningen af tid blandt undertrykte grupper i marginaliserede kontinenter. Hun drager en parallel til undertrykte grupper i Sydamerika, eksemplificeret i bl.a. Gabriel Garcia Marquez' bog: "Hundrede års ensomhed", som er en omfattende beretning baseret på en cyklisk proces og udstrækning i tid, som Michele Mattelart tolker som en form, der på det ubevidste plan giver nogle demokratiske og frie svar og anvisninger. De svage og klicheagtige kulturindustriprodukter - som f.eks. telenovellaen - bliver skabt efter kommercielle opskrif-

ter, styret af markedsmæssige mekanismer, og de har dermed ikke samme brugsværdi som den omtalte roman.

Michele Mattelart finder det symptomatisk, at internationaliseringen af en genre som telenovellaen finder sted på et tidspunkt, som er præget af økonomisk og demokratisk krise. Hun mener, at de kulturelle industrier altid har en ret i ovnen, der er passende, og DER kommer de latinamerikanske telenovellas ind med deres blanding af traditionel populær-fiktion, gængs melodramatik og tidssvarende personer og miljøer. Det er, mener Michele Mattelart, typiske karakteristika for de symbolsystemer, som de verdensomspændende kulturindustrier forvalter.

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When I talk about the Latin American telenovelas it reminds me of the years that I lived in Latin America. Furthermore it was from that period that my interest in this type of media genre grew. Probably the closest genre is the soap-opera, but there are considerable differences on which I will not dwell here. Nevertheless, there is one important similarity on which I will elaborate, as it is on this aspect that I have based a part of my theory: like soap-operas, telenovelas are characterized by a narrative continuum. Their form is syntagmatic. This narrative continuum develops through a series of daily episodes, broadcast at the same time each day over long periods of time. If I insist on this aspect, it is because in my opinion, it is relevant to the connection between this genre and characteristic female reception.

Let us start by stating in what new context we discuss the "telenovelas" in Europe. This context is greatly determined by the phenomenon of privatization, the advance of commercial dictates in European television systems which are generally state-controlled. It is this phenomenon which has largely contributed to increasing the proportion of entertainment and fiction in

the programmes of television companies which we know. Faced with this new request for fiction programmes and with the impossibility of satisfying this request with programmes which are purely national, due to production capacity and cost, the European broadcasting companies, especially those in Italy, discovered that there were other sources than North American television companies which could provide programmes. These European television companies discovered the existence on the international media scene of the Third World actor. Certain Third World industries, the industries of the so-called developing countries, have appeared on the media scene, in particular Brazil. The Brazilian television industry is characterized by its high level of technical sophistication, while it continues to base its work on the tradition of the melodrama. The Brazilian development seems very interesting to me: the melodramatic narrative tradition has taken on new forms which are decidedly modern. The telenovelas genre, in the Latin American countries which have not reached the level of the hyper-modern Brazilian television industry, still remains as a traditional day-time "slot" intended for an audience of housewives. (In other words the situation is roughly the same as that of soap-operas in Britain and the United States). In Brazil the telenovela has been promoted to peak viewing-time.

What I would like to discuss with you is the question of genre and the relation between "gender" and "genre". (French gives problems as there is only one word "genre" with two meanings. English has two words, one originally borrowed from French!). In this exposé I would like to try and characterize the interaction between the feminine gender, femininity, and the media genre.

First of all I wish to discuss the reasons which are relative to the economic and social roles of women, in this game of compensation, contrast and equilibrium between symbolic reward and social and economic rôles (and the related systems which give them value). I intend to relate the notion of "invisible work" with the reward given by the telenovela as a genre. Later

in another connection I will make certain hypotheses on the interaction between female subjective time and certain products of "popular" culture, like the telenovela.

The media genre is therefore, according to my definition, an institution which functions inside the institution television, ie. as a whole range of rules, understood and recognized, a group of elements made up of cognitive elements and emotive elements which permit you to perceive the genre as a communication process, moulding the public and being moulded by the public. This communication process makes the genre into an interaction process, a horizon of expectations which require special affective attitudes from the public.

At the heart of this interaction between the female gender and the genre of the telenovela, there is the problem of the pleasure which women take in watching these programmes. The problem of enjoyment. In my opinion this is an essential question which intellectuals have failed to recognize. These intellectuals, limited by an elitist attitude, have been totally uninterested in the gratification which the popular genres give to their public, gratification which reveals, as an enigma and a problem, what kind of attachment the public feels for these genres.

Invisible work

The first point in my exposé concerns the notion of "invisible work". Everyday life gives a specific idea of time within which woman's social and economic rôle is carried out. It is in the everyday time of domestic life that the fundamental discrimination of sex rôles is expressed, the separation between public and private, production and reproduction. The sphere of public interests and production is assigned to the man, that of private life and reproduction to the woman. The hierarchy of values finds expression through the positive value attached to masculine time and the negative value attached to feminine time, which, for all its potential richness, is implicitly penalized in our

society. Feminine time is interiorized and lived through as the time of banal everyday life, of repetition and monotony.

For several years now the international feminist movement, aided by the analyses of social scientists of both sexes, has been vigorously denouncing the negative value attached to women's house-hold work. It is quite obvious that this work has been looked down upon since it has been regarded as self-evident that it should be unpaid. Usually, these days, once manual work is paid it takes on an economic value, so that any unpaid work, (for example women's housework) becomes economically, and thus also socially and culturally, devalued. The part played by this invisible work in the functioning of economies has been amply demonstrated. Everywhere, in developed and developing countries alike, women form the mainstay of the support economy which makes it possible for all other activities to be carried on. A housewife: a woman who remains at home, performs a fundamental rôle in any economy: she restores the labour force each day. This economic activity, carried on by most social strata of the female population, is of great importance; but the indicators by which the socio-economic situation of each country is defined and which measure its development, conceal the economic value of a housewife's work.

Capitalism simply continued and deepened the hierachical division of labour which became established long before, through the development of different means of production. Men were given the most prodigious and best paid work while women were confined to the least respected. This discrimination of sexual rôles is fundamental to the maintenance of the capitalist economy, and it has been shown that if the proletariat did not depend on this vast female support, the women who cook food and wash and mend clothing, in a world where the necessary services for the collective restoration of the labour force do not exist, the hours of surplus value extorted from the worker by capital would be fewer. One can even say that women's work is expressed through men's work outside by the creation of surplus value.

The invisible nature of women's work and the concealment of the productive value of their household tasks, are of decisive importance in determining the image of them projected by the media and the media's relationship with them. The media have made an effort to follow the traditional household timetable. Radio and television programming is very revealing in this respect. It punctuates the day with moments which make the condition of women at home "worth while" and helps to compensate for being shut up at home all day. It makes women's work legitimate, not as work but as a duty that forms part of the natural function of the woman.

These broadcasts for women may differ greatly, the values around which their themes are structured can correspond to different points in women's relation to capital and to the more or less modern and free-thinking character of the sections of the middle-class and lower middle-class that produce them. Nevertheless they still have in common the rôle of integrating women in their everyday life.

In this process of integration, the melodramatic serial on radio or television has traditionally played a very important rôle. Housework experienced as unproductive and of low socio-economic standing, is countered by these serials which give value to the realm of private life and a female world dominated by 'love' and 'emotions'.

Even a long time ago, before 1917, Alexandra Kollontai noted, when discussing the social basis of the female question, how very far from innocent love stories were, and how the realm of private life had been carefully infiltrated by bourgeois standards: "Even the bourgeoisie which proclaimed love to be a private affair knew how to use its moral norms to channel love in the direction which best suited its class interests".

"(Marxism and Sexual Revolution". Kollontai).

It has become a tradition amongst critics to analyse these messages from the ideological and alienation angle. Ideological

studies tried to analyse the way in which media messages conveyed a whole set of values corresponding to the interests of a particular power system. I myself have done the same and in a certain milieu it still goes on. I do not wish to refute this type of research and analysis, but although I may well consider it still to be necessary, I do not consider it to be sufficient.

Implicitly or explicitly these ideological studies imply/used to imply, that the masses were inert and passive, that they related to the domination structures revealed by the structural analysis. A tendency which has emerged recently in media studies is that which rejects this inevitably passive character imputed to the way in which people receive the messages addressed to them. At the same time, the monolithic nature of the ideological effect of domination is likewise questioned. In other words, we are examining what happens when people watch television: the act of consumption itself. What is the relationship between the message and the subject that receives it, encompassed in a social and cultural world, within an individual history, or the history of a group or class? There are a great many studies on media power structures, national and international, and a great many too on the contents of media messages, but very few on the manner in which the "dominated" groups and individuals read and respond to them, or oppose to them a specific manner of, precisely, appropriation, or resist them (if need be through a change in the original meaning; implicit or explicit), in the name of some project of their own.

While in Chile studying the Popular Unity régime, I attempted to ascertain whether that historical moment, characterized by intensified social confrontations and a mobilization of popular consciousness, led to a critical attitude towards such messages as the melodramatic serials which appeared regularly on television as in the past. Amongst the working-class women activists, I discovered that these telenovelas were not seen as intended and that the way in which they were received denied their internal logic, leading to a roundabout process of consumption. These considerations demystified the illusory social

mobility presented in the serials and revealed the invariability of the possible variations of the genre.

What is really worrying is the joy which these tales continue to give viewers who are critically aware of how alienating they are and have discovered the mechanisms through which they work. It is this question of pleasure which has led me to formulate some hypotheses. It is difficult to disassociate the emergence of the theme of ordinary pleasure from the demands and analyses promoted by the Women's Liberation Movement since the 60s. When criticizing the moral order of the allegedly progressive orthodox left, the Women's Liberation Movement has once again appropriated the dimensions of daily life and of subjective living as a basis for reflection. It seems to me that this contribution by the Women's Liberation Movement has been amply recognised by the critical theories on culture in Anglo-Saxon countries. In France the weight of the theories of ideological and social reproduction (Althusser and Bourdieu) have almost completely prevented this new sensibility from being taken into account in the analysis of epistemological breaks which have occurred in critical research on culture and communication.

Female time

We cannot simply dissociate ourselves from the question of taste and of pleasure produced by these products of the cultural industry. There is a problem here on which very little research has been done. As an initial approach I would like to make a few hypotheses about these female expectations and pleasures. Hypotheses based on what I will call female sense of time. A few years ago in "Notes on Modernity" I wrote that: "The mythical hostility between the notion of woman and that of change must go back to the association, common to all cultures, between the image of femininity and that of the vital elements, earth and water, elements of fertility and permanence. The image of woman is linked to the idea of continuation, perpetuation and duration. We can contrast the time-scale of rupture, crisis and

chaos, corresponding to the concept and representation of change with the female time-scale, a cycle drawing concentric lines which always return to the point of departure, uniting past, present and future. This gives a fluid perception of time in which the eternal functions: home-making, marriage and motherhood are enacted. The figure of female evolution both justifies, by contrast, and compensates for that of male evolution, which fits into the double reality of struggle and world domination", (1).

This specific measurement which female subjectivity gives to time can be defined at one and the same time as repetition and eternity: the return of the same eternal recurrence, the return of the cycle that links it to cosmic time, the occasion for ecstasy in unison with the natural rhythm and at the same time the womb-like dimension, the myth of permanence and duration.

This notion of a specifically female idea of time led me to outline the hypothesis that, above and beyond their themes and images, with their chains of meaning forever retracing the dominant ideology, these television stories, narrated over a long period of time in the form of regular daily doses, could have much in common with this experience of repetition and eternity. These stories could well correspond to the psychic structure of women not caught up in a forward-looking idea of time, a time of change. These vast stories, delivered in small daily instalments and repeated daily, would serve to satisfy through their stereotyped rhythms, the expectations of female subjective time.

By cultivating the enjoyment of non - prospective time, these stories would hold back women's access to the time of planned action, to present time in the making.

(1) "The Myth of Modernity", reproduced in "Women, Media and Crisis, Femininity and Disorder" M. Mattelart, Comedia, London 1986.

This hypothesis must be verified in the light of recent scientific research in the field of subjectivity and the unconscious structures of personality. One thing is certain, up to the present time we have been too satisfied with looking for the ideological dimension of the culture industries in the separate parts of the message, of the metaphor and of the word. Does not the power of the culture industry lie elsewhere than in the stories it tells, which are but epiphenomena of their real message?

Does the culture industry not reinvest the deep psychic structures of the masses, structures which are elements of nature as well as of culture? Could not its ideological function also be found in this constant restimulation of the deep structures of a socially created unconscious?

The notion which women, qua inferiors, have of time can be viewed in two ways: on the one hand as alienated (I dare to use the term). on the other as a positive alternative to the dominant idea of time as geared to production.

Social movements and theoretical movements which have been gaining ground in fact say that: career and work are not everything. This new sensibility gives a heightened value to women's work, to the female notion of time and to the actions of their everyday life.

When the Belgian film director, Chantal Ackerman, in "Jeanne Dielman", filmed the everyday banalities of a woman's life, in real time, she did two things at once: she was attempting to endow with its own language her subjective experience as a woman, unexpressed by culture up to the present time, and at the same time she gave us a creative shock which made it possible to understand by contrast what the usual norm of film time is.

Beyond the egalitarian status which women may have acquired in the world of production, women are trying to vindicate their uniqueness and difference on the level of subjective experience and symbolic representation. This diffuse attempt is leading

them to delve into their age-old memory linked to the space and time of reproduction, in which a part of their sensitivity and difference is being shaped. A difference which is unalterable as it is linked to their psychological, biological and sexual differences which have traditionally been used to alienate and subordinate them. A difference which is expressed today as an alternative world of symbols and meaning.

It is fascinating to observe that this research seems to be paralleled by the exploration of the time-sense of dominated and marginal races and continents being carried out in, for example, Latin American narrative fiction. This seems to me to allow us to envisage a real answer to the female interiorization of the two-fold dimension of time: repetition and eternity. Novels like "One Hundred Years of Solitude" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and "The Obscene Bird of Night" by José Donoso are immense tales based on cyclic progress and monumental lapses of time, fulfilling magnificently the latent unconscious need and providing democratic and liberating outlets, not like the weak imitative products of the culture industry which merely conform to the commercial returns of market democracy.

In my conclusion I would like to return to the present phenomenon of the internationalization of this genre. This internationalization seems symptomatic to me during a period of economic recession and crisis in our liberal democracies, when the system of expectations linked to the consumer society conflicts with its own dynamism of stimulating the wishes of well-being, of growth and greater access to goods and services. The culture industry adapts its strategy in a metabolic way to the hazards of the system, so that it always has several pots (several genres) on the boil! When the modernist model seems to be losing credibility, the traditional model is brought back into favour. In this way genres like the Latin American telenovelas assume their complete originality, as they present, especially the Brazilian telenovelas, a mixture of popular traditional narrative memoirs together with traditional melodramatic memoirs, and mo-

dernity. This, it seems to me, characterizes well what is needed by that part of our symbolic systems which is now controlled by the culture industry all over the world.

At present Michèle Mattelart is at the head of a research project on television at the National Centre of Scientific Research in Paris.