

Telenovela, reception and social debate¹

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ABSTRACT

The essay summarises qualitative empirical research on Chilean television carried out between 2007 and 2014. The article focuses on the interactive mechanism that mutually influences television and viewers through fiction (telenovela). It concludes that the dynamic of social debate can influence the symbolic conditions for the production of television discourse, argument that opposes the classic thesis of television direct effects on society.

Keywords: Telenovela, identification, media representation, social uses, gender.

RESUMEN

El artículo sintetiza un conjunto de investigaciones empíricas cualitativas sobre la ficción televisiva en Chile, realizadas entre 2007 y 2014. Específicamente, se centra en los mecanismos de interacción que se configuran entre la televisión y los telespectadores a través del género televisivo de la telenovela. Concluye que las dinámicas del debate social pueden influir en las condiciones simbólicas para la producción de discursos en la televisión, argumento que es contrario a la tesis clásica de los efectos directos de la televisión en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Telenovela, identificación, representación mediática, usos sociales, género.

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond the structural aspects that define fiction, one of the most universal functions, such as Jauss (1978) stated when referring to the role of the receiver in literature, is the transmission of social norms and models of identification, because of the exemplarity in the work. This thesis seems to gather a meaning, at once profound and contradictory, when we are dealing with the phenomenon of the reception of the Chilean telenovela.

Fiction, and in a primary main way, the telenovela genre, has not only been the vehicle through which Chilean television has proposed dozens of stories, characters, aesthetics and values that are now part of popular culture. In addition, it has introduced, in a persistent and critical way, different matters to public debate and scrutiny, such as social inequality, sexual diversity, domestic violence, the situation of the homeless people or natives, child abuse, among many others (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009). All of these are issues that generally confront conservative, liberal, and progressive positions, both in the institutional space and in everyday life of an individual, i.e., in the social, public and private debate.

That being said, this paper will try to delve into aforementioned common appreciation, arguing that the incorporation of the above contents in the public discussion does not take place only in the direction that goes from television and the media towards social debate. It is also part of a process of symbolic movement that implies an adjustment of direction, ranging from the social and everyday experience of individuals towards the media system.

The point of this article is to show some of the mechanisms of interaction that are created between television and viewers, through the fiction genre that is the Chilean telenovela. These mechanisms reveal how characteristics and peculiarities in the reception of this television genre create tension in distinguishing between discourses of fiction and reality, allowing types of identification with the social and political reality very different from those triggered by other fiction genres. However, even though they could represent a peculiarity of the Chilean television system, we believe they allow to also understand, in a more general way, the gap between public debate on matters of social interest, and the forms acquired by representations, stereotypes, images and speeches broadcasted on TV fiction.

In recent years, diversification of the Chilean telenovela industry, the incorporation of new formats and the emergence of programs of similar generic characteristics, of Turkish and Spanish origin, allow to reinstate the discussion about the relationship between fiction and public debate, particularly in what refers to the tensions that arise in the process of symbolic cultural circulation between what Patrick Charaudeau (2003) calls the production sites, discourses and media consumption.

For this purpose, we will use some of the results and conclusions of a set of empirical researches conducted between 2007 and 2014 about television reception, daily life and appropriation of technologies of communication in Chile.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

TELEVISION INDUSTRY, INFLUENCE AND SOCIAL APPROPRIATION

Despite the remarkable increase in access and Internet consumption, media diversification and technological convergence, broadcast television continues to be the primary means of communication, as evidenced by the high consumption rates, as well as the impact that it still has in the formation of public opinion (Gökulu, 2013).

Beyond the figures, an aspect that reinforces the hypothesis of the relevance of television on the media system and in social reality, is the important discussion that it raises, both at the level of everyday life of individuals and in areas of public debate (Jiménez, 2013). The strong presence of television in these two dimensions of social reality, together with the absence of a scientific perspective in this debate, entice to permanently renew the question of the effect television has on the scope in which it is deployed.

A number of empirical investigations regarding the production, discourses and television reception, indicate that the phenomenon of the symbolic influence of television on the daily life of the individuals and in the public space is still a hard reality to ignore. This is particularly true in places, such as Chile, where the concentration of media ownership, and the links with the political and economic power, is a widespread phenomenon that has been witnessed by innumerable studies (Sunke & Geoffroy, 2001; Mönckeberg, 2009).

This situation is enhanced by the absence of effective regulations able to ensure pluralism that allows greater cultural, social and political diversity in media (Humanes, Montero Sánchez, Molina de Dios & López-Berini, 2013). In this context, the collective Chilean media system, particularly television, seems to play a steering and regulatory role that is extremely coherent with the political and economic hegemonic discourses.

In spite of what was pointed out, there is many evidence indicating that television, except in contexts of dictatorial authoritarianisms, is governed by a logic that is much more complex than those involving only the ideological domain or normative social control. Most importantly, and especially in the context of neoliberal economies as the Chilean one, it appears to be commercial logics that put pressure on the networks to dispute, capture and retain viewers from the increasing competition, not only from other television networks, but also from the web and digital media. This also seems to be at the origin of the growing technological convergence of the cultural industry, which gives access to increasingly larger and diverse audiences, and the subsequent development of discursive strategies which are more pluralist than hegemonic regarding social, cultural or gender matters.

Finally, another fundamental aspect that the empirical research on television provides, that puts in tension both the market logic as well as the influences mentioned earlier, focuses on the relationship with social subjects, users and consumers of programs and television discourses, which do not represent neutral entities that are limited to a passive reception. There is quite some evidence in the social research field that casts doubt on the passivity of the viewer and, on the contrary, it gives us a significant amount of information regarding the multitude of uses (sometimes completely different than anticipated) that subjects give television programs (Bravo, 2013).

The economic needs of the cultural industry in the context of a free market economy; the presence and symbolic influence of television in everyday life and in the public space; social applications and various appropriations that the subjects achieve regarding to media content, just to mention three conflicting dimensions of a complex phenomenon, constitute the point of emergence of a symbolic circulation process from which images, ideas, common sense and discourses are produced, consumed, negotiate, appropriated, and transformed.

In the framework of the social relevance of television and this triple tension that represents the cultural movement of television content, the question of the relationship between TV fiction and social, political and cultural complexity, seems to gain relevancy. It is for this reason that we are interested in the analysis of the Chilean telenovela, a fictional television genre which, as we shall see, is a privileged place from where to observe the relationship between television market, and the struggles between significance, appropriations and meanings that the viewers respectively make of television programs.

CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE CHILEAN TELENOVELA GENRE

Without trying to make a comprehensive analysis of the history of the Chilean telenovela, an issue widely addressed, our interest will be to point out aspects that represent milestones in its constitution and establishment.

The cultural and pedagogical character distinctly found in Chilean television from the early days was a decisive factor for the development of a particular type of fiction on the national screens. The first television productions of a fictional nature retook the great novels and epic characters in the history of Chile. Emblematic works of literature and theatre became the first TV series produced and broadcasted on television at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s. Both the aesthetics and forms of narrative are the same ones found in theatrical representations (Bravo, 2013). However, programs of greater presence on television in the early days were the news, and miscellaneous and conversational programs. Regarding fiction, productions that occupied this space were cinema and American series.

Since 1959, the date of commencement of telecasts in Chile, to the year 1970, there were very few fictional productions made for television. The era of national telenovelas had still not begun, but at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, successful Argentine, Mexican and Venezuelan telenovelas began to be broadcasted.

The real milestone that gave start to the reign of the telenovela in Chile came in 1981 with *La Madrastra* [The stepmother]. The structure of *La Madrastra* reproduces the classical model of the Latin American telenovela: a serialized melodrama that is broadcasted daily in episodes of one hour; a history of misunderstood love

that lasts for several months on the screen; polarized characters, where the good are very good and the bad very bad, the rich very rich and the poor very poor, where the hero or heroine must resist the blows of fate and the villains; a happy ending involving, in the vast majority of cases, the marriage of the protagonists and the material or symbolic punishment of the villains (Martín-Barbero, 1992).

In almost all aspects, the interpretative and comprehension skills required for the telenovela of the 1980s are of a universal nature. Chilean productions did not differ structurally from the rest of the Latin American telenovelas.

During the second half of the 1980s, the final period of the military dictatorship in Chile, the television is definitely consolidated as the main means of communication. The two most important television channels, Televisión Nacional (TVN, National Television, the public broadcaster) and the channel of the Catholic University of Chile, (Channel 13), will start to compete in the production of telenovela. This led to the creation of *dramatic areas* in each channel, specialized in the production of semi-annual telenovelas. A massive and systematic production of national operas begins, which constitutes a first important milestone in the emergence of the genre.

The second element is the establishment of what has been called the *star system* of the Chilean television, comprised of actresses and actors who begin to stand out and become more and more familiar to the public viewer. This symbolic community of national stars that go from one to another telenovela, will constitute the basis of the future relationship between the networks and viewers of telenovela.

During those years, the Brazilian telenovela broadcasted in Chile had huge audience success. Unlike the Mexican or Venezuelan productions that represented the paradigm of the classic telenovela, Brazilian productions addressed relevant historical, social and identity issues, incorporating, at the same time, content and sensual images, something never seen before in this genre. Another new element provided by this type of production was the humor and irony, along with increasingly complex and multi-dimensional characters. Also the technical aspects of the story, as well as the editing and audiovisual language, were innovative: they had many scenes filmed in exteriors, with camera movements and cinematic settings, as

well as great performances. Later, when the political situation and financing conditions allowed it, the Chilean national telenovela would find a model to follow from these Brazilian productions.

Finally, the end of the military dictatorship in the year 1990 is a fourth milestone for the consolidation of the Chilean telenovela genre. In the context of a consolidated industry with progressively larger spaces of freedom opening, the two main television channels will deepen their competition in the telenovela market. Little by little, the model of traditional operas was replaced by productions that incorporate themes strongly linked to national identity, the social reality or problems of everyday life (Fuenzalida, 2011). It begins to show Chile, its landscapes, typical characters, cultural diversity, its history and social conflicts (Mujica, 2007). The aesthetic and narrative model is to be based mainly on the Brazilian telenovela, but the nexus and the public loyalty strategy will support itself in the identification effort with the community of actors and actresses from each dramatic area.

Overcoming the presence of foreign fictional productions, in the first decade of the 21st century (unlike what was happening in the earlier age of television or what happens in some developed countries), the most consumed fictional productions in Chile were produced in its own country, a phenomenon only relativized by the audience success that the Turkish telenovela had in 2014. While the production systems of TV fiction in Europe seem to be established from an imperative competition with America, the Chilean television industry, peripheral from every point of view, has opted to develop niches, that have no other competition than the internal one.

METHODOLOGY

As noted, this article summarizes the findings and conclusions of a set of empirical researches carried out between 2007 and 2014 on television reception in Chile. The objectives focused on knowing and describing the mechanisms of interaction that are configured between television and viewers, examining the characteristics and peculiarities of the reception of the various television genres and analyze the distinction between fiction and reality discourses. In a complementary manner, a corpus of television programs were established, which were selected based

on the criteria of consumption (*rating*) and diversity of genres (Miscellaneous shows, news, telenovela, talk shows, reality shows, etc).

The methods used, referred to in this article in particular, considered exploring the senses mediated by programs of fiction and the specific television enunciation mode which is verified in the telenovelas, since they are the cognitive and perceptual framework anchored in the processes of signification, identification and attribution of meaning that interested us. With this objective, a semio-pragmatic and narratological analysis of the programs of television was used (Odin, 2000) as well as an ethnomethodological analysis of discourses, stories and meanings that viewers enunciated (Seirl & Watson, 1992).

The techniques of information gathering used, in the case of the analysis of the reception, were focus groups, in depth interviews and ethnographic observation. For documentary work, television programs were recorded and viewed.

RESULTS

From the enunciation point of view, one of the main distinctive features of television is the constant mixture of discursive genres of reality and fiction (Jost, 2001). While most of the other traditional media (with the exception of Internet) anchor their discourse in any of these two extremes, television continues to alternate and associate the telenovela with central news and the program that follows, building a discourse of second degree through its programming, which overlaps and turns the types and forms of classification in canonical cinema or literature useless. In other words, the flow of representations between fiction and reality is constituted in a syncretic, complex and contextual discursiveness.

Something equivalent can be seen if we position ourselves from the perspective of analysis of the genre of the Chilean telenovela. There are two processes of construction of meaning in the reception that not only mitigate the opposition between the categories of fiction and reality in the case of the telenovela, but it also reinforces the idea that fiction turns out to be a trigger element of debate on the social issues at the heart of everyday life and the Chilean public space. In this aspect, the telenovela is much more important than other TV genres of reality, as the

newsreel or television documentary: the discourses of the telenovela include a process of identification and social uses.

IDENTIFICATION AND THE FIGURE OF THE ACTOR/ CHARACTER

La mayor parte de las investigaciones en torno a la telenovela tienden a considerar este tipo de producciones televisivas como un territorio genérico de características relativamente homogéneas y estables. Sin embargo, cuando se incorpora en el análisis la dimensión de los procesos de identificación en la recepción de la telenovela chilena, esta similitud estructural. Most of the investigations about telenovelas tend to consider this type of television productions as a generic territory of relatively homogeneous and stable characteristics. However, when the dimension of the identification process of the reception of the Chilean telenovela is incorporated, this structural similarity at the textual level between the current national telenovela and other television fictional series, including the Latin American telenovela and the Turkish one, it does not seem to be the element that defines the horizon of expectation of the viewer in respect to this type of program (Amigo, 2002). The promise of a sense of the national telenovela is not limited to a specific topical structure and diegetic intrigue, or a narrative formula that combines melodrama with comedy, but it is strongly marked by the type of relation of identification that the viewers build.

One of the most interesting results of our research on identification in the telenovela is that, at the level of the relationship of the receiver with the character or fictional characters in the Chilean telenovela, the identification produced may be paradoxical if we consider it from the traditional framework of the ideal theory on the reception of fiction programs (Lochard & Soulages, 1998).

At the level of the fictional diegetic world, the kind of relationship that allows building the set of characters, including the figure of the hero (which is usually not attributed to a single character for the majority of viewers), is the *identification by sympathy* type. According to Jauss (1978), the sympathy identification tends to eliminate the distance between reader and character (as in the *identification by admiration*). This proximity effect is constituted from the formula of the flawed hero, familiar and comparable to the reader (*equal to or inferior to the viewer*).

The majority of viewers interviewed attributed to characters traits possible to recognize in any “normal person, like people you see on the streets”. No aspect of the personality of the characters represents, for receiving subjects, a feature they want to possess particularly or that imply a model to follow. However, beyond the findings regarding the relationship between the viewer and the character, what was both surprising and paradoxical is the creation of identification by admiration and by sympathy, not only concerning the figure of the character, but directly associated to the person or actor. Identification by admiration conditions the relationship of the reader to the hero through the mediation of a distance. The hero is constituted from the reception, as an individual of exemplary and virtuous characteristics, a model. Applied the concept to television reception, identification by admiration crystallizes in the figure of the idol. According to Pasquier (1998), the television idol is constituted, in most cases, from a specific type of superiority: its physical appearance. This is its index of perfection, of superiority, which establishes it as a model.

The person and not the character becomes an object of admiration. At the behest of the character, most viewers manifest some kind of admiration for actors who interpret the fictional roles. This identification by admiration is expressed mainly in three aspects: in respect to the physical appearance of some actors and actresses, regarding their personalities and, finally, to the type of activity carried out on television (as actors or actresses of telenovelas, members of the symbolic Olympus of television).

In most of the opinions, the figure of the actor is superimposed to the one of characters they embody. This identification by admiration with the actor, who represents a self-consciousness very clear on the condition of reception, is not assumed by the subjects as an opposition between person and character, between fiction speech and reality discourse, but rather as a fusion, where the sensibility attributed to the actor or actress defines sensitive characteristics of the character. When the subjects were consulted about the characteristics of some of the characters in relation to the actors who play them, most aimed to note the real sensitivity of the actor expressed in the characters.

This latent real person (actor) in the fictional telenovela diegetic world prevents that the character is completely autonomous in their imaginary world. The

understanding of the story, characters, and diegetic world of a national telenovela is not isolated from all other previous telenovelas: while the character is circumstantial and subjected to the rules of the specific diegetic world, the actor remains from telenovela to telenovela. It also does not occur isolated from the reality discourses that confirm the status of fiction in this type of programs, such as reports on the central newscast about the production of the telenovela, interviews with actors, promotion in newspapers and magazines, etc.

From the perspective of the traditional rules of analysis of fiction, this situation presents a paradox. The attitude of viewers opposes to the attitude of cooperation with the text that is implicitly accepted in a “contract” with fiction. However, this does not give way to the deactivation of the world, as in the case of a rupture in the diegesis, but that, on the contrary, is integrated without greater contradiction. This phenomenon is not a widespread situation of the reception of fiction, so it may indicate a particularity, if not exclusively, at least distinctive of the Chilean telenovela in opposition to the telenovela in general or to other types of TV fiction.

As we have pointed out, this feature of the telenovela relativizes the opposition between reality and fiction, which gives, at the level of the construction of meaning in reception, a status similar to the reality discourses and non-reality television. What is really important in the understanding of a telenovela is the contact experience and identification with sensibility: with the actor/character, the story and the narrative, beyond its significance.

SOCIAL USES: TELENVELA AND REALITY

One of the most important aspects of the social character of the reception is that it cannot be reduced to the time of contact between the viewer and the program. A constant that can be observed is the incorporation and use of television speeches in everyday life, both within the family and outside it (Drake & Machado, 2013). The time of television reception is dispersed and fragmented inside the interaction of everyday places (home, work, friends, school). It is there, at the time after the contact between the subject and television, where a set of social practices of significance and re-semantics intervene. The appreciation of a character or a situation of the plot is usually put into discussion and the significance each viewer constructs appears to be nothing more than the result of a set of negotiations of significance within the heart of social and everyday life.

In general, fiction is understood in a very limited way, only in its entertainment aspect or in its dimension of narrative evasion, especially if it is a television program. However, based on the analysis of social speech of Chilean viewers, it can be concluded that, from their perspective, the telenovela meets a very important role in the social debate, serving as activator of the conversation in the interior of the family that gathers around the TV or in groups of friends, colleagues or classmates who comment and discuss about the plot. To a significant degree, topics of interest and concerns, which are not reflected in other programs and subjects that are weakly received by other instances of socialization, are exposed more or less simply in the telenovela. From social, ethnic or sexual discrimination to domestic violence or drug addiction, the telenovela has become a true showcase of the set of issues that cross all of our contemporary social life silently. Rules of conduct, proposed significances driven by fiction, and values, are not consumed in a thoughtless way, but processed and revalued in the bosom of the family and the social sphere.

One of the most interesting finds that arise from the results of empirical research on qualitative consumption of television programs in Chile, is that almost all of the subjects stated that they develop more discussions in their own homes from the contents and stories of the telenovela on the issues that may be considered topical and of social interest rather than from the central television newscasts.

The contemporary Chilean telenovela implies, to its audience, the appropriation of skills to construct meanings that are local; also, the ways of consumption guide us to very specific, pointed self-referents of the country and its people, while North American series, on the other hand, put in place universal reading devices. This allows building a hypothesis on the strong impact of the telenovela in the production and reproduction of imaginaries and representations about national identity (Morales, 2010).

TELENOVELA, REPRESENTATION AND PUBLIC DEBATE

As mentioned before, contemporary television fiction, unlike what happened in the period of the Chilean dictatorship, has introduced systematically and openly in the social debate public issues of a controversial nature and for which there is a collective

consensus, representing fields of symbolic dispute between progressive and conservative sectors of Chile. As noted, the main instrument through which the television is involved in this debate is fiction, particularly, the telenovela.

At first glance, this would seem to indicate that Chilean television is playing a democratizing role, since the proposed themes and their treatment place a perspective in the social debate that seeks to expand the margins of the current pluralism, positioning itself in opposite stance to social discrimination, cultural or gender wise. This is completely contradictory and inconsistent with what could be expected (such as prejudice or judgment) since the concentration of ownership of the media is in more conservatives political and economic sectors of the country.

This apparent paradox is crucial to understand the mechanism of interaction that is configured between television and viewers through fiction.

Among the themes, stories and most controversial stereotypes in respect to which we can make a historical follow-up, is the representation of the gay figure in the telenovela. The different stereotypes and representations that circulate in society regarding homosexuality are easily attributable to cognitive schemes derived from the imaginary, whether conservative or progressive, feminine or masculine, old or modern, since the elements that conform and justify them, in each case, connote an ideological position of whom stated them. For this reason, it is very enlightening, for purposes of making visible and evident the interaction designated between television and viewers through fiction, to see the transformation, through the history of the fictional television treatment of the homosexual subject.

The first report of the representation of a gay character in a Chilean telenovela dates back to the year 1981 on the telenovela *La madrastra*, during the period of the military dictatorship. It was a very minor character, totally peripheral in the diegesis: a waiter of a bar whose brief appearances did not go beyond minutes, two or three times a week (the format and structure of the Chilean telenovela are episodes about an hour long, broadcasted Monday through Friday, spreading each story as a whole for more than three months, and in some cases, a year). Heavily stereotyped, *the young man of the counter* (sole name that this character received) had the only purpose of taking the gibes and making people laugh because of his effeminate condition. The

representational model of *the young man of the counter* corresponded fully with the hegemonic imaginary at the time regarding homosexuality.

A second *gay* character in a telenovela appeared much later in a production entitled *Marrón Glacé*, in 1992, at the beginning of the first post-dictatorship democratic government. During this period, and despite the risk that even then Pinochet represented for the consolidation of the process of restoring human, civil and political rights of Chileans, individuals began to express forcefully their demands and claims for sexual, ethnic and cultural communities. The character was Pierre the Font, head chef at an exclusive restaurant. Structural features that Pierre represented retained to those based on the conservative and sexist stereotype regarding homosexuals, i.e., he was an effeminate subject. However, there were three important differences compared to the previous *gay* character. A first differentiating element is that the character has a role, which is itself justified in the plot and story. Although it is not one of the protagonists, it is not a peripheral character, and holds one of the dramatic secondary lines of the telenovela. Secondly, the character is not isolated as *the young man of the counter*. It is part of a community of characters, issue that, although it is not enough to legitimize it, claimed it as an individual, out of the situation of only being the object of laughter and teasing. Finally, his appearances were daily. Despite not being one of the main characters, he had presence in the story. During those years, the Gay Liberation Movement (*Movimiento de Liberación Homosexual*) presented in Congress the first proposals of reforms to laws that were clearly of a homophobic nature.

The first great rupture with the conservative representational model appears a decade later, the year 2003, with the telenovela *Machos* (produced by the channel of the Catholic University). Ariel was one of six brothers of a dominant and masculine family clan, whose head was a sexist and chauvinistic father. For the first time the figure of a homosexual was built from a paradigm different than the traditional one. Ariel was presented as a *normal* individual, i.e., not effeminate and none of his behavioral characteristics “betrayed” him or marked him “different” to the heteronormative paradigm. According to Cohen (2005), heteronormativity is the practice and institutionalization that legitimizes and privileges heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and *natural* within the society.

The *gay* character from *Machos* assumes his sexual orientation through a discourse that is sometimes vindictive, and at times intimate and sensitive, causing, in the plot of the telenovela, a strong confrontation with his father and some of his brothers, who do not accept his sexuality. He is represented, from every point of view, as a character trying to obtain identification by sympathy, i.e., in a positive way: he is sensitive, a fighter, solidary, and comprehensive. He is victim of incomprehension and rejection of those who appear as inflexible, anachronistic and violent. Although the story does not locate him within the main protagonists, his role is directly linked to them. In *Machos*, for the first time, a *gay* character is vindicated on Chilean television. Although there is one detail: his sexuality is always presented through declarations, or speeches, one never sees him with a partner. It is the character and his discourse only. By then, some of the claims posed by Lesbian and *gay* rights organizations had materialized and, among other achievements, programs of sex education in State schools had eliminated much of the homophobic content.

A few years later, in 2006, there was a second breakthrough on television representing homosexuals with the telenovela *Cómplices*. In it, Javier Núñez and Sebastián Opazo are a homosexual couple that live a love story stressed by the need to hide their reality and feelings. Without being the protagonists, their role is important and is directly linked to the main plot. As in the previous case, both characters are represented in such a way that they establish identification by sympathy.

In 2009, another important breaking point: in the telenovela *Los exitosos Pells*, Martín Pells, now the main character, protagonist of the story, is a known conductor of television who must hide his homosexuality. To keep up appearances, he simulates being married with a beautiful celebrity figure. In this telenovela, the alternative stereotype to conservative heteronormativity is consolidated: not only is the main character a homosexual, but it also presents a set of *gay* characters who constitute a real community inside the diegetic world.

In 2009, the night telenovela *Dónde está Elisa?* went one step farther with the forms of representation of gays: the character Ignacio Cousiño, a successful lawyer, married and father of loving family, falls in love with Javier Goyeneche, his wife’s *gay* friend. Meaning, it is a heterosexual character that discovers

his homosexuality, or is *transformed* into gay, one of the most feared “ghosts” of traditional masculinity. Three years before, for the first time, parliamentarians from the left-winged had introduced in the Chamber of Deputies a same-sex marriage project bill.

Since then, the *gay* characters have multiplied in Chilean telenovelas: they have become part of the expected diegetic world, establishing a representational normality very different from that which was argued with the *young man at the counter* in *La madrastra*. In the year 2014 it was approved in the Chamber of Deputies the project draft *Agreement of life as a couple (Acuerdo de Vida en Pareja)*, which tends to resolve the unions between people of the same sex.

From this summarized account, there are two aspects that are relevant to the objectives of this reflection. On one hand, it is obvious that the growth of pluralism on television is closely related to the deepening and progress of the processes of democratization in the country. Yet, secondly, it is very important to pinpoint the finding that there is a gap between the progressive contents presented on television and the state of the public and private discussion about certain issues, such as the representation of the *gay* figure.

The broadcasting of *Machos* and, particularly, the story around the homosexual character Ariel, unleashed, at the time, an important debate, both in everyday life of the individuals and the public debate about sexual diversity. For the first time, television openly treated the issue and did it from a very different stance than the traditional conservative point of view.

However, as it can be seen in the comparative analysis of synchronous forms of fictional television representation of *gay* characters, from the public discussion on the matter and the set of qualitative researches on television consumption, it is not television that creates the social debate about sexual diversity. On the other hand, *Machos* is the result of changes in the social, political, and cultural context of the country, as it allows television, as part of its strategy to capture new and greater public, in this case already sensitive

to the subject, exceed the margins of the conservative media discourses. Strictly speaking, television does not impose a progressive perspective on sexual diversity in the social debate, but it adapts to the new subjectivities that are taking place in the society, be it for financial needs, be it imperative to retain levels of credibility with the audience, or be it because of a genuine interest in the matter.

At least in this case, the status and range of public and private debate regarding sexual diversity is much more developed and advanced than the process of transformation of the representation of the homosexual in the telenovela. Each of the stereotypes that broke with the heteronormative model proposed by telenovela in the observed period can be recognized as advances in the social legitimation of sexual diversity. However, in each case, these developments are in a previous stage of the social debate on the matter.

CONCLUSIONES

Unlike the approaches that start with the question regarding the effects or the influence of television on the social world, the analysis presented in this paper opens the possibility of looking at the media phenomenon from the opposite perspective: from the point of view of how social dynamics can set the symbolic conditions for the production of discourses on television.

From this point of view, the Chilean TV fiction, notably the telenovela or telenovela genre, represents a media phenomenon that allows to observe the complex process of a cultural movement in Chile, tensions and interests, disputes of meaning that occur between the subject, the television networks and the public discussion.

The telenovela is not what originates change in the social debate, but it can have a multiplier effect, beyond (probably) the own interests of the television channels or the expectations of individuals and social actors. In that sense, this type of production becomes, for the researcher, an interesting index of the realities that crisscross the social complexity of a country.

FOOTNOTES

1. This article is part of Project Fondecyt Regular No. 1140935 , entitled "Convergencia mediático tecnológica y vida cotidiana: transformaciones socioculturales del Chile contemporáneo" [Technological media convergence and everyday life: sociocultural transformations in contemporary Chile] (2014-2016). It also uses the findings and conclusions of projects: Regular Fondecyt No. 1095180, entitled "Jóvenes, recepción y usos sociales de los discursos sobre la sexualidad y el género en programas de alta audiencia de la televisión abierta" [Youth, reception and social uses of discourses on sexuality and gender in programs with high audience in public television] (2009-2011); Regular Fondecyt No. 1070916, entitled "Identificación y usos sociales de los discursos de información televisiva por parte de jóvenes del Gran Santiago. Recepción y representación mediática de los jóvenes en el telediario" [Identification and social uses of television news speeches by youth of Greater Santiago. Reception and media representation of young people in the news] (2007-2009); the Ecos-Conicyt No. C07H02 project, entitled "Dispositivos, discursos y relatos televisivos. Una aproximación comparativa entre Chile y Francia" [Devices, speeches and television stories. A comparative approach between Chile and France] (2008-2010).

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