

CHAPTER 4

THE CONSUMPTION OF TURKISH TV SERIES IN CUBA: A STUDY ON THE DISTRIBUTION, ACCESS, AND EFFECTS OF POPULAR CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

In recent years Turkish TV series have gained popularity among the Cuban population. This is the first time that Brazilian, Mexican and Colombian soap operas - traditionally with many followers on the island - have been displaced by Turkish products regarding the preference of the national public. Access to Turkish TV series in Cuba isn't through national television broadcast. The distribution is happening from an alternative network of informal exchange of audiovisual products. The popularly known "Weekly Package- el paquete" (a kind of offline Netflix with 1 terabyte of information that can be purchased clandestinely on the island for the approximate value of 1 USD) distributes new episodes of Turkish soap operas on a weekly basis. Hence, because of the informal nature of its distribution, it is very difficult to know accurately the audience rating and other relevant data of the reception process regarding Turkish Television Series. This study aims to explore the distribution, access and consumption strategies of Turkish TV series in Cuba from a qualitative methodological perspective. Since the study is the first research on las turcas in Cuba, it presents some valuable data on the current situation of popular culture in Cuba with a focus on Turkish television series.

Keywords: Turkish Tv series, las turcas, el paquete, cultural flow, globalization

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture and its global circulation is a matter of cultural politics today. Thanks to the developments in internet technologies, popular culture which is supposed to be local has had the chance of going beyond national and cultural borders. This possibility of global circulation is not solely under control of media industry anymore. There may be alternative voices that can penetrate today's culture industry.

This chapter aims to deal with the circulation and diffusion of popular culture in today's world from a different perspective. The literature deals with the global circulation of popular culture and popular culture in Cuban context. The research of the study is realized in Cuba where Turkish television series are surprisingly popular. Since Cuba is not totally included in the global popular culture due to many reasons including governmental policies, the fact that Turkish television series are one of the leading popular culture products in the country is to be studied in detail. Taking the popularity of Turkish television series in Cuba as an example, it is aimed to discover the changing nature of cultural flows.

Popular Culture in Today's World

Today, when culture is evaluated within the context of globalization, one of the most important factors that enables the globalization process to accelerate is popular culture. Popularization of any cultural product means that product is likely to become a part of the global culture and cultural process thanks to global circulation of culture. In this age of information, every cultural product that reaches people on a global scale via means of mass communication or internet technologies is an element that nourishes popular culture.

Popular culture studies has become a multidisciplinary field that is enriched with many different disciplines. "The development of popular cultural studies is based on the contributions of many different disciplines. These include literature, literary criticism, history, psychoanalysis, and sociology" (Strinati, 2003, p.xv). The interdisciplinary nature of the popular culture leads to a constant change in popular culture studies that constantly evolves with the addition of conceptual innovations, empirical research techniques and theoretical discussions from related fields. One of the primary concepts that developed and changed the studies of popular culture is globalization.

According to Mattelart, the world is in search of a global culture (Mattelart, 2001, p. 104), and therefore a single image market is to be created. The creation of this market is additionally related to creative culture industries as well as communication technologies that

make their circulation much easier. Dworkin defines the cultural understanding of the new world order and the cultural products as a part of the special language we share (Dworkin, 1985, p. 231). The continuity of this particular language may be possible as long as a common understanding lasts. This is where popular culture comes into play and creates a common language, understanding and sharing area. Nowadays thanks to internet technologies, popular culture is also spreading in different ways and this circulation creates a new form of cultural understanding which is worth in-depth analysis.

As a result of the globalization and current situation of the unlimitedness that come along with the latest technologies, alternative cultural movements from different parts of the world have been included in the global circulation of culture. The one-way communication activities and cultural impact coming from the West have become multifaceted and the idea of a rather global cultural flow has been accepted (Biltreyst and Meers, 2000, p. 394). US is no longer the only one who has a say in the cultural flow. Alternative streams also have a considerable success in the production of culture products, and they can often be preferred over the American one for creating alternatives. The consumer, who has been looking for a way out of American culture, can easily reach the alternatives in today's world and Cuba has always been a good alternative for many reasons. The changing culture of Cuba is to be analyzed in the next chapter.

Popular Culture in Cuba

Cuban popular culture is formed by a mix of cultures: Indigenous, Spanish, African and Chinese culture. This phenomenon is called by Fernando Ortiz (1940) “ajiaco cultural”, an authentic dish made up of the mixture of different ingredients. This definition recognizes that the popular culture is traditional by essence, totalizing by its breadth and transcends the boundaries of the sectors properly identifiable as popular (Martínez Casanova, 2001). At the same time, in the case of current Cuba, popular culture is constantly changing and regularly incorporates diverse cultural goods from around the world because of the inclusion of the country in globalized world through intensification, diversification and acceleration of the flow of goods, information and people (Hernández & Pezo, 2010, p. 85).

Although Arjun Appadurai (2015) recognizes that there has always been cross-border flow, exchange and mixing, today these processes occur rapidly due to the speed and diffusion of the Internet, the simultaneous growth of travel, the communication through intercultural media and global advertising, phenomena which is also more present in Cuban everyday life now.

Cuba has been permeated, although not with the speed that the globalization brings and the opening to current communication services and products, by the cultural mix, hybridization in terms of García Canclini (2008), which had its origins from the XVth century with the process of Spanish colonization.

Nevertheless, after the Triumph of Cuban Revolution the circulation of foreign cultural products decreased because of political, economics and ideological reasons. The idea was to protect the revolutionary process from everything that could go against it, and the foreign popular culture could be a powerful enemy but today the reality is completely different. After 60 years of Cuban Revolution, the cultural policy of Cuban government is more flexible about the consumption of foreign cultural products. Many years ago, it was prohibited for example, to listen the music of The Beatles, but young people developed strategies to break the prohibition (Saborido, 2009; Castellanos, 2005). They listened to music in low volume and danced, copied songs in cassettes and spread it among friends. However, today the reality is very different. But we need to consider that the flow of popular culture in socialist countries is different in many aspects such as the role of the market, the state cultural policy and the limits of cultural commercialization (Manuel, 1987).

In spite of the geographic situation, Cuban people don't live the cultural isolation anymore, especially after the recent actualization of economic model in 2011 and the new ties with United States since 2014. Nowadays, Cuba is becoming a part of the global cultural flow. Three examples of the current relevance of Cuba in the global flow of popular culture would be helpful to see the situation more clearly. These events all took place in 2016. The first was the concert of The Rolling Stones in Havana, the second was in the same place, the first fashion show of Coco Chanel in a Latin American country and the last one took place in the capital city also, and it was the filming of the popular movie *Fast and Furious 8*.

These events not only brought important exponents of international popular culture to the island, but also they positioned Cuba as the protagonist and source of inspiration for popular culture expressions such as music, fashion and cinema.

The major insertion of Cuba in the globalized world allows Cuban people a major access to foreign popular culture as well. The Cuban immigration reform in 2012 made it possible for Cuban citizens to travel abroad without the government authorization. They can be in touch with international popular cultures directly and when they come back, they bring their experiences and material objects of popular culture with them. Also, the tourism, a relevant economic activity in the country, allows local population to have more proximity to foreign

products of popular culture. Another important change is a larger access to information via Internet starting 2015 with the implementation of Wi-Fi connection points in public spaces, and then with the possibility to connect from houses. Cuban people have access to internet via data mobile technology as of 2019, but it is limited since the cost is quite high and there are internal and external regulations to access some websites.

As a natural consequence of the contact with the global world, in the last years (since 2009 approximately) an explosion of consumption of foreign popular culture occurred, this sudden consumption started especially in audiovisual culture and this is directly related to the creation of “the weekly package” (*El paquete semanal*). It’s a kind of offline Internet content that you can purchase for 1 dollar approximately every week, and you can access to 1 terabyte of international information such as series, movies, television shows, concerts, music, apps, etc. “the weekly package” has an underground distribution strategy from Havana, where it is created, to other cities in the country. Also, the distribution is a-legal: it is not legal but, at the same time is not illegal, there seems to be a legal ambiguity. This is the exact reason why the weekly package has become the most popular strategy of distribution. Furthermore, it is easy to distribute from hand to hand.

Before “the weekly package”, Cuban people consumed foreign audiovisual products as well but it was much less. Indeed, Cuban television broadcasts many programs from different countries and the most popular series have been from Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and the United States. There were also alternative ways to consume foreign television programs through banks of VHS cassettes in the last of years 1990 and then, with CD and DVD. The other alternative way is called “the cable” or “the antenna” and it works only in the most populated neighborhoods in the capital city such as Habana Vieja and Centro Habana. “the cable” is installed illegally from house to house and it allows to access contents through satellite antenna, and you have access to a wide variety of content, especially programs from Florida (the United States).

Research about the informal consumption of audiovisual products argues that “the weekly package” is result of a progressive socio-technological evolution of the information circulation mechanisms in Cuba (Perterra, 2012; Basail, 2006). However, “the weekly package” extends the access to audiovisual products from the capital city to all other cities in the country. In that process, a significant part of circulation happens without money between friends and relatives, this action becomes a distinctive act that proves the associative capacity of people (Rodríguez, 2019). Also, “the weekly package” contains more information than other alternative ways of information circulation and thus, people have the possibility to choose from a great variety

of different programs (series, movies, shows, news, etc.) from geographically and culturally distant countries such as Korea and Turkey.

A Research on Turkish series in Cuba

AIM AND METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the fact that Turkish television series and their success in Cuba where they are not broadcasted in national television can be considered an example of the global circulation of popular culture. The research conducted in Cuba aims to discover the limits and nature of this circulation and to understand how it functions.

Such a study could present important insight on popular culture and the way it spreads in today's global world. Furthermore, there is limited research on global popular culture in Cuba and there is no research on Turkish television series in Cuba, either.

The research includes in-depth interviews realized with the Cuban audience who regularly watch Turkish television series. Miller & Glassner state that “a strength of qualitative interviewing is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts of social worlds” (Miller & Glassner, 2006, p. 137). The reason why this technique was adopted is the fact that there is no research on the topic and the first research is to be exploratory through narration. The participants were selected using the snowball technique. 15 women were interviewed in total. The majority of the sample is women who reside in two both rural and urban areas. Nevertheless, that was not relevant in their consumption and reception of Turkish series. The participants are asked open-ended questions regarding Cuban popular culture, the system of the weekly package and Turkish television series. The interviews were all conducted in Spanish. The questions asked during the interviews include questions about the function and distribution of “the weekly package”, what they think about Turkish television series and how Turkish television series have changed their ideas regarding other cultures.

FINDINGS

Function and Distribution of the weekly package, *el paquete*

Participants affirmed that they all have access to Turkish series through “the weekly package” every week. If series aren't new (new meaning they belong to the same season or they are still broadcast in Turkey), they can copy many episodes at the same time, but when series are recent, they can only copy the latest episodes once a week. On the other hand,

people don't have capacity to save a large volume of information, Turkish series have too many episodes generally, and for that reason people need to go to the house of "Paquetero" (the person that has "the weekly package") many times during the time they watch one series. Some people also told that they copy the content that has already been bought by some of their friends and they pay much less. Thanks to the distribution and variety that comes with the weekly package, the participants mostly prefer the weekly package to the national television.

According to interviewees, the moment of the copy becomes a social meeting where it is possible to meet new people, to talk about their lives and receive advice about audiovisual products. Also, people discuss about series, movies and shows and, make suggestions to each other on what to watch next.

We suppose that the origin of the visualization of Turkish series in Cuba is due to the success of this series in Latin America and the United States, especially in Florida television (Hechavarría, August 12, 2015). Cuban people have a close relationship with the popular culture in the USA, especially because of their ties with parents, relatives and friends who live there. This nexus could explain the origin of expansion of Turkish series in Cuba through underground mechanisms of their distribution. Another reason is the fact that Turkish television series have also conquered South America and this meant dubbed Turkish content could circulate much more easily.

What Cuban people think about Turkish television series

When the participants were asked about why they prefer Turkish television series over other series or telenovelas, they stated that they prefer Turkish telenovelas over others such as Brazilian or Mexican telenovelas because there is a great variety in Turkish series. Many of them refer to their love of Turkish television series with the phrases "estoy enganchada" or "Me casé con las turcas" referring to the current situation that they are simply hooked with or obsessed with Turkish television series and the main reason is that there is always something new in terms of what is happening throughout a series of events. Another reason why they prefer Turkish television series is that Cuban audience interviewed appreciate that there are conflicts in Turkish television series and this makes series exciting.

Another reason why Cuban audience enjoys Turkish series is the fact that love is shown in a different way, it is not like series from Brasil, Columbia, or Mexico where love is quite carnal and always includes sex. Turkish way of depicting love is what makes Cuban audience enjoy since there are long glances at each other or holding hands. The way the theme of love appears in Turkish television series seem quite "tranquil" and "not aggressive" in their own words.

When the participants are asked what exactly it is that they enjoy watching Turkish series, many of them referred to Istanbul and architecture. They also know some other Turkish cities such as Bursa or İzmir only because they have seen some Turkish series that were shot in those cities. For instance, thanks to the famous Turkish series titled as *İstanbullu Gelin* (*Evermore – La Novia de Estambul*) they have no difficulty in remembering or pronouncing the Turkish city Bursa. Architecture, houses and furniture is the other elements they like seeing in Turkish series. They are curious about how Turkish people live and seeing those beautiful houses nicely decorated with design furniture makes them enjoy the in-house scenes besides the outdoor scenes where they enjoy the beauty of Istanbul or the Bosphorus.

Another theme that came up in the interviews is the Turkish fashion which is quite visible in Turkish television series. In nearly every Turkish series, there is a stylist working to differentiate the characters in the series through their way of dressing. This is seen and very much appreciated by the Cuban audience. They consider Turkish women beautiful and chic.

Food is also another topic that is often referred to in the interviews. Cuban audience is curiously watching how and what Turkish people eat. The fact that Turkish people drink a lot of tea during the day is mentioned in many of the interviews and 2 interviewees even told that they started drinking tea thanks to Turkish television series. Another participant told that she enjoys the scenes where the characters cook step by step nearly giving a recipe. She also said that she has tried to follow the recipes and cook in the Turkish style although she has had to replace some ingredients; also she started drinking tea, that is not common in Cuban culture, but she tasted and liked it after watching Turkish series.

How Turkish television series have changed their ideas regarding other cultures

Out of the 15 people interviewed, all of them told that they do not know anyone who is Turkish or who has been to Turkey. They also agreed on the fact that before watching Turkish television series they knew nearly nothing about Turkey. However, they are now familiar with Turkey, Turkish culture and Turkish traditions. The person that watches Turkish television series for the longest period is the one who said she watched the Turkish series for nearly ten years. Among other participants, there are people who watch Turkish television series for different time spans from five years to one year. Since they have the access to many episodes of the same series at the same time, they watch the content “sin parar”, that is without having to wait for the next episode. It is not possible to calculate how long they have been exposed to Turkish content (due to the subtle nature of the weekly package system) but a participant

told that she has been seeing “the 900th episode of the Turkish series *Elif*”. Also participants mentioned a lot of Turkish television series including *Aşk-ı Memnu (Amor Prohibido)*, *Erkenci Kuş (Pajaro Soñador)*, *Vatanım Sensin (Te Amaré Por Siempre)*. When asked how many Turkish television series she has seen, an interviewee told she has seen around fifty. All these signal to the fact that they have seen a lot of Turkish television series.

All the participants had some idea about Turkey and Turkish culture. Informants highlighted the central role of the family in Turkish culture: they admired the importance of the family in Turkish people, especially the respect to old relatives and their behaviors. Many times, they compared that reality with Cuban everyday life in families adding that they would like it to be similar. Moreover, interviewees drew attention to the strong presence of customs and traditions in Turkish everyday life regardless of generations. Besides the fact that they don’t understand some of these they still admire the customs. For example, women’s costumes, especially the head scarf is another reference point on Turkish culture. Also, they appreciate the style and elegance of Turkish woman for dressing.

Interviewees refer to Turkish television series they have seen as a source of information on Turkey. They admit that they did not know anything about Turkey before starting to watch Turkish television series. However, they think they know more about Turkey now. For instance, a participant told about *Vatanım Sensin (Te Amaré Por Siempre)* highlighting the fact that she did not know about the war between Turkey and Greece. While watching the series, she also looked it up a lot.

Some of the participants also said that before watching the series they thought Turkey was an underdeveloped country and their ideas completely changed. None of the interviewees has visited Turkey, but they all would like to travel there. They think that Turkey is a beautiful and developed country, but they wonder if it really is as shown in the series.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The weekly package system can be considered an alternative to the global circulation of culture which functions based on many criteria such as transnational agreements, copyrights, media conglomerates, distribution and broadcasting. The system of the weekly package is solely based on uses and gratifications: is the audience wants the series, the people downloading the content will include it in the weekly package. This alternative media system seems to be free from any mediators between the audience and the content.

A natural result of the weekly package which seems to be free from any legal dependence is the current situation of Cuban television: Cuban audience does not have to endure what national television gives them. They have alternatives thanks to the weekly package and the most popular alternative that comes forward in television series is the Turkish television series for the time being. Cuban audience seems to be fans of Turkish content that comes weekly to their memory sticks. They have become quite familiar with Turkish television series and they have seen some old ones while they are also seeing some recent ones like *Erkenci Kuş (Pajaro Soñador)* which has had its final episode in Turkey quite recently. They like Turkish television series for a number of reasons including the content quality, the way love is depicted, Turkish scenery, Turkish fashion, and the beauty of Turkish people. Furthermore, Turkish content in Cuba serves Cuban people as a source of information on Turkey. Cuban audience enjoy Turkish television series while they also see them as documentaries on Turkish culture consciously or unconsciously. People interviewed all had opinions on Turkey, they never told they did not know anything about Turkey. This level of familiarity comes from the series only regarding the physical and cultural distance between two countries.

This chapter only shows preliminary results of an ongoing research. We need to deepen in the analysis and to pay special attention to topics like the role of women in Turkish society and on the one hand how it is narrated in series and on the other hand what is the opinion of Cuban audience about this topic.

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