CHAPTER 2

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND THE IMPACT OF TURKISH TELENOVELAS IN CHILE: BACK TO MELODRAMA

Lorena ANTEZANA BARRIOS¹, Pablo ANDRADA², Constanza MUJICA³

¹Assoc. Prof., University of Chile, Institute of Communications and Image,
School of Film and Television, Santiago, Chile

e-mail: lantezana@uchile.cl

²Assist. Prof., School of Government and Communications, Universidad Central de Chile, Santiago, Chile
e-mail: pablo.andrada@ucentral.cl

³Associated Professor, School of Communications, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile
e-mail: mcmujica@uc.cl

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ABSTRACT

In March 2014, Turkish melodramas took Chilean TV screens, and thereafter Latin American screens, by storm. Since then, Chilean television has incorporated Turkish productions in its usual programming. Ten titles were broadcast during the first two years. Between 2014 and 2018, 40 melodramas were aired, and for the last two years they have occupied more screen time than fictions from any other country, including Chile. What are the reasons for the success of Turkish dramas in the Chilean context? What are the main challenges that Chilean and Turkish productions have been facing since the eruption of Turkish telenovelas?

The methodology used in this research was that of a semi-structured interview which was conducted with 146 people in order to discover the reason for the appeal of Turkish telenovelas as compared with local melodramas that were broadcast at the same time. These interviews were used to build selection criteria for nine in-depth interviews.

The results indicate that Turkish telenovela succeeded in Chile for various reasons. First, these telenovela produced an identification by contrast or opposition in the viewers due to the fact that the recognition of a distinct other affirms and assures one's own experience. Second, the novelty of showing places, characters, and stories that have not been seen before that were produced by an industry unknown to Chileans, resulted in the return of more classic dramas and narratives as well as melodrama aesthetic to the television screen. Third, the type of audiences of these programs grew and diversified thereby influencing Chilean programming. The results presented above suggest that telenovela must begin to utilize local characteristics more frequently in order to generate conditions for the global recognition of a Chilean production model.

Keywords: Media industries, transformations, telenovelas, reception, melodrama

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the 60s, the telenovela genre has been present in the regular programming of Chilean television. National productions shared this space with other Latin American productions, which varied according to the development and fluctuations of this industry in each of the countries that produces this genre –mainly Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia.

From the 80s until the 90s, national productions were the audiences' favorites, although they would share the screen with other telenovelas produced in Latin America. Even though they were from a different country, the reality shown in these foreign telenovelas felt quite close, both geographically and culturally, to that of Chilean viewers.

From 2000 onwards, there has been a reduction in television audiences. Since 2006, the Chilean chapters of the Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction (Obitel) Report have shown a steady decline in the Chilean channels' home ratings, reaching critical levels after 2016. This drop in the public's consumption caused, in turn, financial losses in almost the entire Chilean television system (including the public channel). Therefore, faced with a crisis, the channels turned to formats with cheaper production costs, such as reality shows or talk shows, and to outsourcing local fiction production to production companies and to looking for international fiction products in new markets.

It was in this context that, in March 2014, Chilean screens –and then, those of the rest of Latin America– were invaded by Turkish melodrama. The story has taken the contours of a legend: two Mega executives, at that time a channel with very poor audience levels, were waiting for a meeting in the 2013 MIPTV television content market, when they found themselves facing an almost empty stand in which a Turkish producer was offering the series *Las Mil y Una Noches*. Although there were no subtitles and they did not understand the language, they felt an emotional bond with what they were watching and were able to understand what was happening. They thought it could be an alternative for their channel's prime time because it was addressed to a “general, broad, mostly feminine audience” (Julio et al., 2015). The rest is well-known in the Chilean industry: Mega went from 4.7 rating points to 29, becoming the most relevant actor in the Chilean market, and the Turkish series, with an intense melodramatic component, became a success in almost all countries of Latin America.

Since then, Chilean television has incorporated other Turkish telenovelas into its regular programming, broadcasting 10 titles during the first two years. Between 2014 and 2018, 40 titles have been broadcast and in the last two years they have had more screen time than any

fiction of other origin, including Chile. Although their average household rating has dropped over the years (from 16.6 points to 7.7), it has not been due to the loss of popularity, but rather because of the increase in titles offered per year (from 6 in 2014 to 16 in 2018), and also because of a change in time slots (from primarily prime time to after lunch and evening) and an increase in channels (from two channels in 2014 to five in 2018) (Obitel, 2018).

The success of Turkish melodrama stresses the complex relationship between that which is foreign and that which is local; yet this time, it has been hard to explain the viewers' preference for a seemingly distant production, both geographically and culturally.

Due to the changes produced by advances in technology, the media has stopped offering uniform and massive content and has started to adapt to different segments of the population, customizing the contents. New communicative practices have allowed the coexistence of passive audiences, typical of the television era as a hegemonic medium, and communicating audiences that produce communications from their consumption, transforming themselves into consumers who produce, or prosumers. The prosumer's idea makes it possible to think and wish for a society in which people intervene in the production of the media contents. The passive consumer becomes a message creator, making the relationship between the media and audiences much more horizontal.

The prosumer is part of a convergent media ecosystem. Instead of grouping all the media in one device, technological development has created different artifacts that link to each other. According to Jenkins (2008), this convergence is part of a cultural process that alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences.

The media industry business model of calculating audiences through rating measurements, and then offering them to advertisers, is becoming increasingly obsolete. The culture of convergence entails a reconceptualization of the public's relationship with the media industry, so the latter should change its strategy from stickiness to propagability.

The stickiness strategy, that considers fixed recipients with unified experiences and pre-structured interactivity, must give way to propagation strategies, in which individuals navigate through the media in search of dispersed materials, as happens with YouTube, where we can find different experiences and open endings. Considering this, the classic sales teams of media industry marketing should give way to proselytizing consumers that reformulate their products (Jenkins, 2008).

Television seeks to adapt to this new media ecosystem by incorporating elements of interactivity, with the inclusion of hashtags or narratives in other formats, to their television (transmedia) products. For Orozco (2011) one of the keys in studies of audiences in network societies will be determining where the consumption ends and where the “communicants” production begins.

AIM AND METHODOLOGY

In this work we ask ourselves: What are the reasons for the success of Turkish telenovelas in the Chilean context? And which main challenges have Turkish and Chilean productions faced after the Turkish eruption?

The epistemological basis of this research is found in the audience studies developed in Latin America since the 1990s, which link English cultural studies and critical theory (Focás, 2014). We understand that television reception is not only related to the viewers’ social class (Grossberg, 2009), their cultural resources or their gender and specific needs, but also to the contextual and political characteristics in which these processes occur (Antezana & Cabalin, 2016). In line with the above, we consider that viewers are part of interpretation communities (Varela, 1999), and characterized by multiple mediations (Orozco, 2003). Thus, we used a strategy that incorporated, at different levels, two of the epistemological bases of qualitative methodology: interpretivism and social constructivism (Schwandt, 2000).

The field work was organized in two phases. The first consisted in the development of a semi-structured, self-applied questionnaire (involving 146 people) that allowed us to perceive the characteristics of the consumption of Turkish telenovelas at the time of the research and the reasons for their attractiveness when compared with those of the national telenovelas that were broadcast in the same period. It also enabled us to draw up the criteria for selecting the people to be interviewed in the second stage, which considered: (1) life experience, with age ranges between 20 to 30 years; 31 to 50 years, and 51 to 65 years; (2) socioeconomic status, divided into three large groups: high, middle and low, and built according to the classification of the community in which they live, and (3) their occupation, also in three categories: student, dependent worker, and independent worker (housework). Thus, we conducted nine in-depth interviews with people who met these criteria.

The reception analysis that we developed is based on the recognition of “proximity” that these productions propose, understanding it as the relationship that brings together two subjects (or objects), and that implies a minimal differentiation between them, which

distinguishes it from pure and simple fusion. Intrinsically dynamic, proximity constantly oscillates between two opposite poles of a variable nature (close–far, familiar–foreign, imminent–remote, etc.). Working from this framework involves asking about the relationship between the media product and its recipients, from an appreciative dimension that makes it dependent on the sociocultural context in which it occurs, since what is close in one culture is not necessarily so in another (Fastrez & Meyer, 1999). Therefore, proximity would not be a fixed state but rather an intermediate position where a distance reduction movement is made (Antezana, 2018), which should be evidenced.

Thus, a good part of the studies regarding television consumption of foreign programming in local contexts suggest that audiences prefer to watch products whose origins they perceive to be culturally related (Straubhaar, 1991). However, cultural proximity as the main criterion of television consumption has been relativized by studies on the success of melodramatic fiction in diverse cultural contexts. Thus, the Latin American telenovela has been consumed in Eastern Europe, Asia and the Middle East since the 90s (Piñón & Rojas, 2011); Japanese and Korean melodramatic fiction is successful among the Latin American youth audience (Dettleff, 2018; Hartzell, 2019). These studies suggest that the recognition of the keys of a specific genre relativizes the relevance of language or customs similarities in a television product's perceived proximity (Hartzell, 2019; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

FINDINGS

Below are the main results obtained from the interviews contrasted with the survey data. According to the analysis, there are several factors that would explain the interest generated by Turkish telenovelas in Chilean television viewers, one of them being its novel character that would arouse curiosity about this new product.

In general, the people interviewed, and almost regardless of their age, already had a well-nourished previous repertoire of telenovelas, and were well acquainted with the particular features of foreign telenovelas that were being broadcast in Chile, namely, Venezuelan, Mexican, Brazilian, Argentinian and Colombian, but they had not yet seen a production that seemed so geographically distant, which made it attractive. They say:

“I wanted to know the culture they showed, the landscapes, the architecture, all of it. From a cultural point of view, it is very attractive” (interviewee, female).

This factor, together with the dissemination strategies of the first Turkish telenovela broadcast in Chile by MEGA, gave good results in terms of audience. The strategies used were:

(1) Self-promotion, making announcements before and after the broadcast of other telenovelas and throughout the day, involving the viewer through captivating questions such as “Would you sell your body to save your child?” or “What would you be willing to do to save your child?”.

(2) Broadcasting summaries of the week during the weekend.

(3) Scheduling its broadcast at nighttime.

In addition, they managed to increase interest in the telenovela through the use of the current media ecosystem (press and entertainment programs, comments on social networks, recommendations of other people), aspects recognized as part of a second-order television (López, 2014), a feature of current consumption and of digital transformations.

“[...] And out of curiosity too, because I wanted to know why so many people were watching Turkish telenovelas, because it’s somehow weird” (interviewee, female).

Once the initial curiosity to watch some episodes of the new Turkish telenovelas was satisfied, the viewers were able to recognize their distinctive features by relating them and contrasting them with other types of productions they knew. Thus, they perceive the Turkish telenovelas to be close to the Venezuelan ones (which are regarded as the classic ones) for three reasons: first, because women suffer throughout the television show to be rewarded at the end; second, they respond to patriarchal values and, third, their language is more neat, i.e., they do not use bad words or idioms (which might, in part, be due to the “neutral” translations used). Turkish telenovelas were regarded as being close to those from Brazil because of the perception that Turkish productions develop social themes, but they would be more distant from Chilean ones, considered to have less depth and to be closer to humor than to drama.

In this regard, viewers recognize the constant elements of the telenovela structure (presentation of the initial situation and the leading couple, a development of intrigue with conflicts and obstacles that must be overcome and a happy ending—generally happy—with a moral) and distinguish the typical aspects of Turkish productions. Thus, as we have already said, they value the combination between what is familiar and what is novel and strange. As a national media outlet acknowledges when referring to *Las mil y una noches*: “It is a very attractive story that shows us a context different from the Chilean. This is Turkish, but regardless of whether it shows us another country, it is very contemporary” (Duarte, La Segunda, 2014).

Regarding the duration of Turkish dramas, which could be too long for new generations of viewers who are used to shorter and more limited serial formats, our interviewees point

out that this is not an important factor. For many, it is better that way, since it allows them to become familiar with the characters and the complexities of the stories; they can also incorporate these new landscapes, rituals and traditions into their knowledge, and, if they are already “hooked” on the story, they can enjoy it for a longer time and integrate it into their daily routines and habits. This is the case as long as the telenovelas are agile and entertaining (which would be another characteristic that they recognize in Turkish productions), i.e., many things happen, different and surprising, that maintain interest and tension, and the stories and secondary characters have a good development in the intrigue.

“The characteristic of this telenovela is that there are conflict and the conflicts are super short. A conflict appears and it ends, you know, it is resolved, then another appears, and it is resolved, there are constantly conflicts that are resolved” (interviewee).

The viewers’ knowledge of the genre allows them to recognize that telenovelas tell stories related to the place of origin, therefore they broadcast customs, music, rituals, forms of relationship, typical concerns, from which they can learn. They can also get to know other geographies, landscapes, and natural features of a country of which many had no previous knowledge, and so the telenovela “is like reading a book”, as they say. All of this in an audiovisual format that they recognize as very good, with a “cinematic” aesthetic, which would account for a quality production (Antezana & Mateos-Pérez, 2017).

“[...] The telenovela also transmits how the society is culturally, you know, how is the people’s idiosyncrasy, and it amazes me” (interviewee).

This aspect is also ratified by their assessment of the characters, the performances, and their evolution and transformations throughout the story. Characters were deemed more complex and very well-built. The actors also display a type of beauty perceived as more exotic, which, while recognizing that they are surely based on stereotypes, allows the viewers to expand their own repertoires. Their performances would also be more exaggerated –as in theater– and they would be more expressive, facially and bodily, which the viewers value positively because this allows them to empathize more easily with their feelings, which is precisely one of the aspects that make these melodramatic stories attractive (Herlinghaus, 2002).

“I liked the characters, I got involved in the story, let us say. It was like a super real thing. And I suffered with the things that happened” (interviewee).

“The outstanding performances and the actors and actresses’ expressiveness” (survey).

At the content level, interviewees highlight three main aspects of these productions: drama, romance and traditional values. Regarding the first point, they indicate that Turkish telenovelas

address current issues and problems, such as drug and arms trafficking, power, corruption and socially sensitive issues such as abortion, discrimination, and rape, among others. This would make them “realistic” in their eyes. They also point out that drama is important because “it makes you feel and think”. A national newspaper recognized this stating that “the public values the multiple issues addressed. It is not only love, there is also an important historical component and very well-structured characters” (Obilinovic, La Tercera, 2015).

“[...] Real problems, rape, abuse, police and legal corruption” (survey).

Regarding romance, a traditional narrative (Herlinghaus, 2002), they recognize that telenovelas should be about love, that would be the genre’s core and what they are looking for in these stories. They appreciate a romanticism that they consider “pure” in these telenovelas, i.e., without sex and without nudity, which somehow gives them indications of being in front of a “healthier” society, “with more values”, something they are critical of in national and some foreign productions. This aspect—which could be attributed to older respondents—also appears as part of the answers of our younger respondents, who appreciate the contrast between these broadcasts and the more explicit ones, which they are more used to watching.

“[...] A very romantic story, a traditional one [...]. If a telenovela is too explicit it loses romanticism, you see” (interviewee).

As for traditional values, participants identify the family as a primary institution, a support system, children as a central aspect of life, and respect and tradition as ways to protect these spaces. These features are part of the Chilean social imaginary built in the post-dictatorship and one of the pillars—along with work—of the current model (Araujo & Martucelli, 2012).

“Because it seems that they are very conservative, very traditional, of many customs [...]” (interviewee).

However, although they value that women are not treated as objects (i.e., they are not shown naked) and are respected and cared for, they do not like it when they appear as very submissive, or when they suffer greatly (without nuances), and they do not feel they can identify with them.

“Because it is very denigrating, that is why I don’t like it, because the guy raped her and then she falls in love with him, I found her stupid [...] the others I can stand them, because women are below men but they are more bearable” (interviewee).

Regarding identification, the interviewees, without exception, say that they do not resemble the female characters presented on the screen, nor the other characters, i.e., they recognize them all as different. And this is precisely one of the aspects that stands out.

“That is the idea, I don’t want to watch my life on TV, I want to see the lives of others [...] I don’t feel I identified with any” (interviewee).

Once curiosity was satisfied and when the “surprise factor” of these broadcasts had passed, the viewers integrated these productions into their habitual logic of consumption of telenovelas and began to operate with them in the same way as they do with the others. For example, they decide if they are interested in the specific issue that the new broadcast proposes; if they like the actors (they recognize and extend their star system repertoire); if they can watch when it is being broadcast (or later on other mobile devices); if they “get hooked” after watching the weekend’s summary, and if the people around them and the media they usually consume and use (morning shows, radio and press programs specialized in shows –digital or printed–) refer to it (so as to not to be left out).

“[...] The actor... you see him, and you are like, oh, ok, this is a good telenovela. Because the actor is like that, like his characters are always the same, because I had already seen a telenovela with him” (interviewee).

In summary, among the features most valued by audiences in Turkish telenovelas are their identification with great aesthetic quality (the scenery and costumes are highlighted), the fact that they show other realities, customs and places to be real in “appearance” (because although it is a fiction, those who embody the characters belong to that culture, which contributes to the likelihood of the story), the return to the most classic dramas, to melodrama in essence, and the use of a more paused way of building the scenes, with a lot of dialogue, seduction, eroticism and no pornography.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the strategies proposed by reception studies to address the proximity relationship between the reader/viewer and the work/telenovela is to see the phenomenon of identification as a positive dimension of the aesthetic experience whose primary social function is the experience of the other (Pasquier, 1998). In this regard, what we observe from the readings analyzed in relation to Turkish telenovelas is that there would be an identification by contrast or opposition (which could be a distinction from the ironic identification developed by Pasquier) since, in this case, the recognition of a different other allows the experience of oneself to be affirmed and strengthened.

This type of program also allows viewers to access a vicarious experience: the possibility of generating catharsis through the subjects watched and experienced through the screens. The

action of “living through the other”, which “immediately refers to the so-called *soul transfer* that the representations suffer” (Panchi, 2014, p. 41) allows not only an identification with characters and situations, but also, at the very least, an empathy with them, which occurs “not so much because the subject or the situation is shown as close or possible, but because what is looked at constitutes a sort of ‘classic’ scene; a scene that has never necessarily happened to the viewer, but that at the community and media level, is typical” (Panchi, 2014, p. 43).

Foreign telenovelas, even those that are—in appearance—geographically and culturally very distant from the place where they are broadcast, are also capable of generating empathy, due to the materials that make up their staging while operating in a registration of universal emotions, and because they show a reality different from the everyday one that arouses curiosity. They show “the alien”, the exotic, and the “other” with which one can empathize, and which, because of the difference, allows a reaffirmation of one’s own identity traits, “that is to say that the affirmation of an identity is strengthened and recreated in communication, encounter and conflict, with the other” (Vassallo de López, 2008, p. 38). Telenovelas from other latitudes allow us to recognize more clearly the aspects of a specific culture, with its particular life cycles and local problems.

Turkish telenovelas triumphed in Chile for several reasons. Among these reasons are the novelty of showing places, characters and stories that had not been seen before, from a film industry unknown to the country; a return to the small screen of the most classic dramas, the narrative and the aesthetics of melodrama; an expansion and diversification of the type of audience attracted to these programs (influencing the programmatic grid, the channels’ strategies and expanding the topics addressed). All this could bring benefits in the development of local industry, since the new competition forces local characteristics in telenovelas to be enhanced, thus generating conditions for the global recognition of a Chilean production model, among others.

Turkish production needs to consolidate its presence in the Chilean market by enhancing what is stressed by audiences: recognizable characters (i.e., that integrate into the local repertoire and star system), current and short-term themes mixed with specific traditions, customs and ways of life, music and landscapes that show the country, quality productions, well-worked scripts, complex characters, and elaborated intrigues (that make many and varied things happen) all working together in an agile and entertaining story.

NOTES

The field work was conducted by the students Bárbara Olmedo, Erika Sánchez and María Ignacia Vallejos of the Institute of Communication and Image of the Universidad de Chile.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Turkish telenovela broadcast, period 2014-2018					
Year	Amount of titles	Amount of broadcasters	Average household ratings	Highest average household rating	Lowest average household rating
2014	6	2	16,6	29,22 (Fatmagul, Mega, Prime)	6,24 (Kusey Guney, Canal 13, After lunch)
2015	13	3	13,26	24,45 (Fatmagul, Mega, Prime)	5,56 (Kusey Guney, Canal 13, After lunch)
2016	6	2	13,8	19,62 (Sila, Mega, Prime)	8,88 (El Sultán, Canal 13, Prime)
2017	19	3	8,65	20,04 (Icerde, Mega, Prime)	3,86 (Rivales de Sangre, Canal 13, After Lunch)
2018	16	5	7,71	20,2 (Madre no hay una sola, Mega, Prime)	2,35 (Me robó mi vida, La Red, Prime)