

## Melodrama and public pedagogy: The construction of memory from television fiction

*Melodrama y pedagogía pública:*

*La construcción de memoria desde la ficción televisiva*

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This article presents the main results of a research project that aims to analyze the construction of cultural memory through fictional series that represented the dictatorship period of Augusto Pinochet in Chile. Based on interviews and focus groups with young people between 18 and 24 years old who did not live this historical period, the importance of the melodramatic structures of the series is discussed to promote learning about the recent past, thus emphasizing the public pedagogical role that television fills.

**KEYWORDS:** Melodrama, television, memory, reception, public pedagogy.

*Este artículo presenta los principales resultados de una investigación que se propuso analizar la construcción de memoria cultural a través de series ficcionales que representaron los tiempos de la dictadura de Augusto Pinochet en Chile. A partir de entrevistas y focus groups con jóvenes de entre 18 y 24 años que no vivieron ese periodo histórico, se discute la importancia de las estructuras melodramáticas de las series para promover los aprendizajes sobre el pasado reciente, enfatizando así el rol de pedagogía pública que cumple la televisión.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Melodrama, televisión, memoria, recepción, pedagogía pública.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the 40<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the *coup d'état* in Chile (2013), fictional series that focused on Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship and its consequences were presented for the first time on open television, constructed from the point of view of those who opposed it. This broadcast context was fundamental as it allowed these past themes to come to light once again in the media, generating a social climate that made their viewing possible.

Thus, the generation of television viewers who did not experience the coup d'état of 1973 or the 17 years of dictatorship were able to be exposed to a set of images, stories, anecdotes, and characters that put their historical knowledge, which was mainly learned in schools in tension and participate in the process of building collective memory about that recent past.

The series<sup>3</sup> –as a fictional television genre similar to docudrama– allowed the illustration of dictatorial period events in a dynamic and captivating way, in accordance with the characteristics of these new audiences, where melodramatic matrices were mainly used in order to activate processes of remembrance. In other words, the series fulfilled a pedagogical function about the past through the resources of melodrama.

It is here that the notion of public pedagogy becomes meaningful and can help us understand the role of images in the construction of collective memory since public pedagogy points to a cross between education, culture and politics in the learning processes that are given in popular culture.

Considering the above, in this study we are interested in understanding how television fiction contributes to the formation of collective memory in a generation of television viewers who did not experience the events narrated in the series created to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup d'état in Chile. These productions recreated the beginning of Pinochet's dictatorship, the violations of human rights,

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<sup>3</sup> We refer to the series: *Los 80* [*The 80s*] (Canal 13), *Los Archivos del Cardenal* [*The Cardinal's Archives*] (TVN), *No* (TVN), and *Ecos del Desierto* [*Echoes of the Desert*] (Chilevisión).

and the daily life of the eighties, in other words, a time that young people have mainly learned about in history books.

To understand this process, we carried out a qualitative study (interviews and focus groups) with young people between 18 and 24 years old. Using the aforementioned series, we were interested in understanding the way in which these audiovisual records, in melodramatic format, allowed these youth to construct memories about the recent past, considering the notion of public pedagogy as an analytical concept.

In the following section, we present the theoretical and methodological references of our study and then we report on the main findings and their discussion.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The media are one of the three main components of memory in society (Hoskins, 2015). In fact, the very concept of cultural memory is based on the idea that memory can only become collective as part of a continuous process in which memories are shared with the help of symbolic artifacts that mediate between individuals and, during this process, create community through space and time (Erl & Rigney, 2009).

The television series considered in this work are precisely a type of symbolic artifact that allows for the dissemination of audiovisual proposals that, in the case of the generations that do not have direct experience with the events that are displayed, are the main –if not the only– account from which these historical events are given significance.

However, history and memory are not synonyms in the process of learning about the past. When we refer to collective memory, we are not referring to the sum of individual memories, but to a complex and dynamic phenomenon by means of which social groups construct meanings about the past, present, and future that they share. The premise of Halbwachs, who is credited with inaugurating this field of study, is that social groups are capable of constructing images of the world by constantly defining and redefining their versions of the past, allowing them to differentiate themselves from others groups (Halbwachs,

2004). This author defines history as “abstract, totalizing, and dead, as opposed to memory as particular, significant, and alive” (Erlil, 2008, p. 6). Memory needs to be publicly articulated and, therefore, it is an inherently mediated phenomenon (Neiger et al., 2011).

According to Assmann (cited in Baer, 2010), it is possible to distinguish three levels in the processes of social memory construction. The first, which he calls “communicative memory”, takes place in the experiences of everyday life. It is based on the discursive interaction between individuals, and therefore, it is the one that is endowed with greater emotional impact. The second level is “collective memory”, which is more stable, delimited and lasting, where narrations are turned into myths and events into archetypes. The third is “cultural memory”, where the institutionalization of these stories takes place, now transmitted through supports of knowledge about the past, and thus freed from the survival of living messengers of discourses. It is at this third level that the young television viewers of our study relate to television series associated with docudrama based on melodrama.

Defining the genre of a television product is not a minor aspect since each one has its own range of conventions and practices that affect its production and also its consumption. A genre can be understood as “a mediation, a communication strategy that operates between the logic of the productive system and the logic of uses” (Rocha, 2016, p. 156), which implies a relationship between a text –in this case, audiovisual– and a subject.

We have stated that these series are similar to docudramas, which is a hybrid genre that combines the documentary with melodrama, that is, it combines reality and fiction. They are based on or inspired by reality, on the lives of real people or on events that occurred in the recent past (Tadeu dos Santos, 2013). Melodrama appeals to sentimentality, but also aims to teach a lesson through the story. Thus, in these stories, the villain is punished and the hero is rewarded after many obstacles and, in the end, the order that had been initially broken is reestablished.

The reading carried out by the series’ television viewers is linked to the processes of the constitution of memories, those that are always done from the present and those that allow for the construction of stories that grant continuity “to one’s own passing through time” (Feierstein,

2012, p. 121). In this sense, the life experience of each person, their previous knowledge, as well as the context of reception of the series will be important when interpreting them.

The notion of public pedagogy as an analytical concept allows us to understand the contribution of television fiction in learning processes about the recent past and the construction of collective memory. The concept of public pedagogy appeared in educational literature in 1894 and has recently been used to study “places of education beyond school” (Sandlin, O’Malley & Burdick, 2011, p. 338). The media is located within these spaces, especially television, because of its impact on the construction of discourses and social frameworks.

Fictional television series provide viewers not only with a current presentation of past events, but also with arguments that through the re-creation of history, become accessible not from a static event, but in the framework of a process of remembrance (Lipkin, 2011), such as that experienced during the commemoration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup in Chile.

## METHODOLOGY

Considering that television reception is an action of “meaning production” (Orozco Gómez, 2006, p. 22), we opted for a qualitative research strategy that included conducting interviews and focus groups for our study. In the design of both instruments we consider the following dimensions of the television reception process: individual (mental schemes), institutional (interactions), technological (formats), situational (contexts), and referential (age, social class) (Mazziotti, 2006).

The aforementioned dimensions were addressed by placing the study participants in the conditions of “seeing and reading” television. In other words, we investigated the type of viewing, the participants’ personal and family context, their tastes, emotions and interpretations, conversations with family and reference groups, their aesthetic assessment, and their process of remembrance, among other aspects. The interviews and focus groups had two encounters: in the first one, the conversation was without the visual stimulus of the series; in the second,

the conversation was triggered by the viewing of small fragments of the series to observe if there were changes in the construction of the memory of the participants.

The sample of the interviews was constructed in the following manner: four men and four women between the ages of 18 and 24, who belonged to different socioeconomic segments in Chile (ABC1: the richest class; C2 and C3: middle class; and DE: the poorest class). This age segment of the population scored an average rating of 12.9 points. In regard to focus groups, two were held: one for men and one for women. The structure of the groups was identical to that of the one used in interviews with the goal of validating the results and discussing the iconographic repertoire elaborated during the interviews.

Since qualitative research is not intended to generalize its results to the entire population, we defined the sample size based on our research question and the characteristics of the study. Although there are no clear guidelines in regard to this, research seeking heterogeneity in the sample and gathering detailed information on the experience of the subjects place the composition of the sample between 10 and 30 participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Considering this criteria, our total sample was 24 young people with heterogeneous qualities in order to have discursive diversity on a highly controversial topic such as the collective memory of the recent past in Chile.

Once the interviews were carried out, we analyzed the transcribed text by themes, trying to investigate the discursive patterns that the participants created in relation to their reception process, which is multifaceted. This process is not only a record of what is being presented on television, but it is also the dialogue between these proposals and the knowledge, emotional footprints, and experiences that each of viewer possesses.

For this reason, at the level of analysis, we chose to place ourselves in a border zone, where history and communication dialogue and complement each other, and memory occupies a central place because the reading of fictional series intersects with the knowledge that is part of the previous register that each viewer has. In this process, individual memories operate, which, according to Feierstein (2012), are reconstructions created from repetition and emotional affection,

elements that the series precisely use and which are also intertwined with the melodramatic structures that unfold.

In the case of the production of collective memory associated with the reading of the series, this construction of meaning is a kind of re-elaboration of the past that contributes to the formation of the country's cultural memory. Here, cultural memory does not refer to the collection of archives of "cultural artifacts", but rather has an anthropological aspect associated with symbols, ways of life, and meanings that allow for the construction of life in a similar way, where cultural goods, such as fictional television series and their reception play a fundamental role.

Fiction is a part of the primary and secondary socialization processes of audiences, influencing the construction of identities (Chicharro, 2011), by providing stories in which the viewer can recognize their own experiences and those of others, organized in a coherent way and endowed with meaning.

Likewise, the representation of common cultural elements can favor the adherence of subjects to broader communities, which "can serve to transfer values, images, rituals, symbols and models" (Chicharro, 2011, p. 182). The above is what we also observe in the results that we present in the following section.

## RESULTS

Series can be considered mechanisms of social cohesion and contributors to public memory since they do not argue how the past "was", but rather make proposals about how people and events should be remembered; that is, they present frameworks of interpretation (Lipkin, 2011). These frameworks are present in the readings of the study participants, which despite presenting conceptual variations in their reception process, they did not account for large differences associated with their gender or socioeconomic level.

## LEARNING FROM MELODRAMATIC FICTION

Without pretending to extend the assessments made by the individuals in the sample or the conclusions of this study to the entire generation, it

is significant to note that all the participants, regardless of their gender and socioeconomic characteristics, considered that viewing this type of series allowed them to learn about the country's recent past.

The participants considered that their learning was favored by the fact that the series presented historical content in an audiovisual format, using *live* images, in motion, information that is usually accessed through written or oral discourses. Thus, the ability of images to emulate direct visual perception in a realistic way was offered as a substantive contribution to the construction of intergenerational memories insofar as they provide "a vision of the time", and supplement, as prosthetics (Landsberg, 2004), the absence of memories obtained from direct experiences. One of the interviewees highlights this saying:

I think the series helped me a lot because it is different from being told [about something] (Woman, C3, 23 years old).

The format, in this case audiovisual but also fictional, acquires special relevance due to the themes addressed by the series and the cultural consumption habits of the participants, whose generation is one of the first to have grown up surrounded by audiovisual platforms and seems marked by the vicissitudes of a "post-literary" world where, despite the fact that more people can read, almost no one does (Rosenstone, 2013). Indeed, the fact that this type of content is considered "historical" and, therefore, as a subject of study and reading associated with school obligations, seems to generate some resistance that these stories break whenever they are presented as products associated with the entertainment. A participant complies with this thought:

I found that the best way to find out [about this period] was to watch the series because you don't really want to study or read a book about the dictatorship (Man, C2, 18 years old).

However, it is significant that the learning declared by the participants almost does not appear related to obtaining data or specific explanations about the historical period, beyond the mention of some specific milestones. The contributions of the series appear rather linked to the staging of experiences lived by "ordinary citizens", among

which the experiences of political repression suffered by those who opposed the dictatorship were highlighted. These experiences were represented as common, habitual, and at the same time, shared.

The emphasis placed on the pain of those who faced these experiences was particularly striking for the study participants. All of them regardless of their socioeconomic status, gender characteristics, or their political inclinations (or those of their families), indicated that the scenes associated with political repression especially affected them. One participant states:

For me it is a banner of struggle. That this does not happen again because I feel empathy with that situation. And with all the scenes of grief, I was sad, I felt pain, and with [the scenes of] joy I was happy with them... because I felt the same way and like I could be there, I could have lived it. I think they give me the will to continue fighting (Woman, C2, 20 years old).

This, in addition, generated positive evaluations among the participants based on the distance they had between the historical period represented and the period in which they operate and which they valued as much less violent and threatening. As one participant says:

They lived through very different situations. And what my generation has to live through, [it is] something different, unrelated to that oppression because we can share our opinions without any problem. We are not afraid (Woman, C2, 20 years old).

In this sense, fiction and melodrama seem singularly suitable for the construction of collective memory since, according to the distinction made by Halbwachs (2004), these stories do not focus on the great events that transformed the life of the nation nor on the great abstractions about the period that characterize the construction of a historical discourse, but on the socialization of the shared, habitual, and daily experiences of repression. In this way, these local experiences, which for years outlined the construction of underground memories (Ohanian, 2012) of resistance to the dictatorship, appear to be taken by the series and adapted to be incorporated into these massive stories within the framework of the television industry, thus becoming elements of

the broadest and institutionalized memory regime of the national narrative.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERGENERATIONAL VIEWING

The participants watched the majority of the series with their relatives or other adults close to them, who due to their life experience or having more secondary information resources about the period, were able to complement, qualify, or contradict what the young people who participated in the study saw on the screen.

It is precisely this joint viewing that allowed the process of the construction of social memory to become more complex insofar as the television story presented as cultural memory became a catalyst for the construction of communicative memories. The vast majority of the participants indicated that the viewing of the series made it easier for their parents to talk about the period and about their own experiences, related to daily life at that time, but also to the political situation. These conversations allowed participants not only to better understand the historical period recreated by the series, but also to understand how family history is inscribed in shared national history, and how they themselves as subjects were outlined by family and social dynamics traversed by these processes and experiences that they were unaware of. One participant says:

Yes, at that time I did not know these things, but having my mother's story [being told] at the same time with the image, I think it helped me not only to empathize but also to draw the narrative of the series to my family because although there was no talk of dictatorship in my house, it was in the way that my mom opened up to me, and told me those things, and my mom had blocked these things... I think that everyone who saw *Los 80* saw it with an older relative or they were that older relative. So that helps the story being shown to be linked to your own story and you learn about yourself and the other learns about you [too] (Woman, DE, 22 years old).

Conversation also reveals itself as an important indicator for the participants when considering and pondering the discursive proposals

of the series. Although all the participants attributed informative meanings to series, considering them realistic and credible, the negotiated readings they made of some of their aspects were attained precisely by these intergenerational conversations, to the extent that the participants also lacked other references on the period with which to confront the stories of the series, regardless of their gender characteristics or socioeconomic status. In this regard, a participant believes:

For example, in the story a person from the CNI (Chilean secret police) shows himself to be kind... There were really bad people, but this individual interacted with the family, became attached... I was touched by this. That someone bad from the CNI, a monster, a beast actually had a heart, and he probably was not the only case, rather, there must have been more than one. My grandmother tells me that she was taken into custody and the police were kind to her and that makes me feel strange (Woman, C2, 20 years old).

One of the demands of the participants in their negotiated reading with the series was the coherence between the stories received from their close environment and the series, “a resonance effect” (Chicharro, 2011, p. 185). The recognition by viewers of elements in the series that they could identify as common to their own history favored their evocation processes. Thus, the rigor of the fictional stories in the series went through their evaluation in relation to this family correlative, allowing coincidences to validate the oral discourses of family and loved ones, certifying them. One participant states:

Seeing these events, where they tell you a story, makes it much more important... that your parents and grandparents tell you that things were this way, it allows you to trust, you believe (Woman, C2, 20 years old).

On the other hand, the majority of the participants also perceived that the series show only one more perspective among others that address the topic. However, some participants from different socioeconomic strata perceived these fictional proposals as if they were windows to the past.

In general, I feel that the series is done super well, but I needed to see more of the right side, the historical part that is taboo... that they make Pinochet more visible because he was an omniscient character... he was not even shown. He was not characterized by an actor, I would have liked [to have seen that side] (Man, C2, 18 years old).

In general, there is a perception among the participants of not knowing what really happened because they did not live through the period. The majority perceives that many of the stories that they are exposed to are subjective and that some of them are openly distorted, so there is a demand for objectivity in approaching the subject.

### MELODRAMA AND MEMORY

From the point of view of content, these series generally narrate dramatic cases of real origin, through the fictional representation interpreted by actors. The exception is *Los 80* whose context –not the characters– is real. In this regard, the proposals are close to the definition of a docudrama, which, as we said, combines elements of the documentary with melodrama.

One of the most outstanding aspects for our participants is the choice of actors/actresses. Many times they remember the actor playing the character more than the person being interpreted. They recognize their career and consistency in addition to their acting quality. The prestige of the actors gives them guarantees of the quality of the series. The fact that some may be part of the international circuit (the actors, their directors, and their exhibition) also constitutes a point of attraction. A participant indicates:

Yes, what I remember the most are the scenes where the main character came out, which of course was from the Vicarage (from Solidarity), and I remember Pancho Melo [name of actor is Francisco Melo], who I saw in a cassock. Those are the actors that you remember so well. You remember the actor more than the character (Woman, ABC1, 23 years old).

Another outstanding aspect –and one that has already been mentioned previously– is the truth effect that the series generate,

which is reinforced through the use of archival materials such as photographs and old films. The most common of these resources is the presentation of television programs, especially the news of the time; the incorporation of film records of urban spaces during that period, showing the transport/bus system that was used; or the filming of street demonstrations and of the repression carried out by the forces of order. This reference is familiar to them since this generation in Chile has been characterized for reoccupying public space in recent years in mass demonstrations and their confrontation (wanted or not) with the special forces of the police. One participant comments:

I highlight this with the feminist movement. It's that, there are people now who criticize it, [but] back then it would have been horrible, [you would have been] branded, and now you are proud because they are speaking out for people who do not dare to (Woman, C2, 20 years old).

In relation to the truth effect, the vintage setting is another of the highlights of the series. The care of the details, of the hairstyles, clothing, decoration, and spaces gives credibility to the story: "the location helps us feel the authenticity of the staging. It touches home when you see what happened in the docudrama that often recreates events that happened in the places where they occurred" (Lipkin, 2011, p. 4). For this generation of television viewers, this aspect acquires the value of a testimony. It is a test of faith and the gateway to a period story. A participant illustrates the above:

... the series was done really well and showed exact details of the time: the color TV, the shop, the telephones, the reality of being unemployed, how companies closed, all the problems that there were in the economy due to blockades, all the problems that could exist (Man, ABC1, 20 years old).

The same type of visual record (filming and montage) does not allow them to see the difference between archival images and new records, helping to reinforce their realistic reading of the series. In these productions, they also recognize a strong melodramatic and emotional appeal. This is achieved, in addition to the stories told, by the use of music, photography and the use of light.

Among the feelings that these series generate, we find sadness (pain), frustration and anger. The series awaken in them the desire to fight, to rebel against injustices, to go out to the streets again and demand their rights. This feeling is consistent with the life cycle in which they find themselves. A participant exemplifies this:

I was sad because I can't make sense of what happened. In general, I felt sad because there were people who suffered, people who lost loved ones, people who to this day do not know what really happened, who perhaps died some time later, that is my feeling. Grief, rage, because they were adults, that more than for a color, for a party, one has to know how to understand... (Woman, C3, 23 years old).

Melodrama is part of the narrative plots in the series. In the series *Ecos del Desierto*, the projections and future of a young couple in love were destroyed with the execution of one of them –Carlos Berger–. In *No*, the son of an exile who returns to Chile and works on the campaign tries unsuccessfully to get back together with his ex-partner while in *Los Archivos del Cardenal*, in addition to a love triangle in which the protagonists are involved, the execution of the father and the desire for revenge are actions that mobilize the plot. In *Los 80*, a middle-class family struggles to cope with the problems of everyday life.

The centrality that the participants in our study give to female characters and the empowerment of women is relevant. One participant says:

Yes, Ana (protagonist of *Los 80*). I liked her empowerment, and I wanted to know what empowerment was like. And I would ask my parents, and they would tell me about feminism, and I would ask myself, What was feminism? (Man, C2, 18 years old).

In all the series, the opponents –antagonists– are linked to the dictatorship, with officials of the military regime and other agents of the dictatorship, although the most prominent aspects in relation to the violation of human rights are the curfew, the repression in the streets, and exile. One participant comments:

I have been able to study. I have been able to live my adolescence completely normal, and I put myself in the place of that child (Felix, a character from *Los 80*) who could not go out into the street. It is a change of life to live in a dictatorship (Man, C3, 19 years old).

In the closings or final episodes of the series, we find ethical-moralizing effects, also characteristic of the docudrama, linked to the bases of national reconciliation established by the transition governments in Chile and recognized by Araujo and Martuccelli (2012) as founders of the current Chilean society: one's work would be "the area in which a particular positive self-perception of oneself is obtained and affirmed: that of being a good professional or a good worker [and that constitutes one important factor] of vital intensity and even of existential excitement" (pp. 47-51) and the daily life and importance of the family (whose center of concern will be the children).

Indeed, the content transmitted and the script that emphasizes "salient" aspects to those related to the violation of human rights are part of the events remembered by the participants of our study. The same as locating the specific plot developed by the series between historical milestones (temporal spaces) recognizable by the majority of the viewers, which allowed them to understand the actions of the characters in a larger interpretation framework that contributes to strengthening the construction of cultural memories.

These would be the aspects of the melodramatic format that are interesting to enhance for the construction of collective memories, fundamentally for the generations that no longer have a direct link with the historical events that are told.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the notion of public pedagogy, it should be noted that the theoretical assumption that fictional series could allow for students to challenge knowledge they acquired in history books about Chile's recent past is not fulfilled. Not because the series do not allow us to understand that historical period, but because the participants had very

little information about the 1973 coup d'état, the Pinochet dictatorship, and human rights violations. In other words, in their schools, this topic is not analyzed in detail and is practically omitted from the official curriculum. Before the viewing of these series, their main references came from intergenerational and family stories.

Thus, like Chicharro (2011), we can affirm that melodrama has become a learning space for different generations of viewers. Furthermore, Chicharro (2011) argues that the Spanish production *Amar en Tiempos Revueltos* can be considered an “educational soap opera” (p. 184) since in his research he concluded that melodrama fulfills identity, informational and socializing functions in young audiences.

Precisely in reference to the use of melodramatic resources in the series, our preliminary assumption was that the aesthetic and narrative characteristics of this type of subgenre facilitate the process of remembering and learning, thus contributing to the construction of collective memories, fundamentally for generations that no longer have a direct link to the historical events that are being told. The research results confirm this assumption.

The melodramatic structure of the series also makes it easier to remember the characters, plots, and dramatic plot twists of the series. The participants, by situating their reading in a larger television register, remember the actors and actresses also for their other productions, and manage to complicate what is seen in the series and adopt a position or attitude about the narrated events.

Hence, one of the main findings of this study, but also one of its main frontiers, is related to the possibilities offered by the intergenerational viewing of fiction series when it comes to building more complex cultural memories. The social discourses that emerge from melodrama allow for the construction of frameworks of interpretation to understand painful social phenomena, such as human rights violations and political persecution.

Television fiction presents historical events of the past in a melodramatic way in order to relate them to everyday subjectivity that, paradoxically, is more distant from the socio-historical reflection of a conceptual and abstract nature (Fuenzalida, 2011). Thus, this generation of viewers can read the narrative proposal of the series as a “case”, a

particular story in the framework of a larger one, and this allows them to emotionally connect with it but also to make a critical balance of historical and political events.

In this way, popular culture, television, and especially docudramas related to melodrama (Fuenzalida, 2008) have a “powerful pedagogical force” (Giroux, 2004, p. 62). This pedagogical force is expressed in the production of narratives, images, and frames of interpretation that allow people to observe themselves and also their relation to other people in a situated context.

For this reason, the participants of our study challenge the schematization didactics that are learned through history books in their collective construction of memory, which is nourished by multiple stories, small stories, and images from different fields. One of them is popular culture, which obviously includes television and, above all, melodrama.

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