

## Melodrama's emergent scenarios in the contemporary audiovisual landscape

*Escenarios emergentes del melodrama en el  
paisaje audiovisual contemporáneo*

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This article displays a series of reflections on recent theoretical developments in the field of communication and cultural studies about melodrama and its transmedia nuances. Taking Jesus Martín-Barbero's reading of melodrama as a dense cultural matrix for Latin American modernity that structures discourses, genres and formats, the article argues that such framework remains pertinent and useful in the light of emergent socio-technological configurations in the field of production, circulation and consumption of transmedia content.

**KEYWORDS:** Melodrama, television, audience, narrative, modernity, audiovisual.

*En este artículo se realiza una serie de reflexiones sintéticas en torno a algunos de los desarrollos teóricos recientes más relevantes sobre el melodrama. Tomando como eje de referencia el trabajo canónico de Jesús Martín-Barbero sobre la materia, el texto plantea la necesidad de recuperar la noción del melodrama en tanto matriz cultural característica de múltiples experiencias de las modernidades latinoamericanas capaz de estructurar discursos, géneros y formatos audiovisuales, así como las prácticas de producción, circulación y consumo de las narrativas transmediales.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Melodrama, televisión, audiencia, narrativa, modernidad, audiovisual.

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“What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? No. It’s stories. There’s nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it. And who has a better story than Bran the Broken? The boy who fell from a high tower and lived... He’s our memory. The keeper of all our stories. The wars, weddings, births, massacres, famines, our triumphs, our defeats, our past. Who better to lead us into the future?”  
Tyrion Lannister<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The caption that tops this text belongs to a crucial dialogue that closes the American television epic series *Game of Thrones* (GoT, 2011–2019). The character Tyrion Lannister, in this instance is addressing political leaders from the Council of Westeros who have been recently confronted by a bloody conflagration. Lannister interpellates his co-protagonists by emphasizing the role that narrative plays as a frame of reference to legitimize the vital experience of a potential political leader. On a different level –an analogy– this scene refers, in turn, to the intrinsic capacity of good storytelling to bring together and produce communities through the joy and pleasure shared by the recipients of a good story. The aesthetic gesture of self-reflexiveness is suggestive –among other things– given the very high level of popularity of this series, for which several millions of regular viewers waited for more than a year to watch the final season. The delivery of the last episodes of the series was the subject of all sorts of speculation between fan groups and fans (Serjeant, 2019).

Like many other successful global transmedia texts produced in recent years, this series has been the subject of an intense social “conversation” that has as its stage a series of emerging *public sphericles*<sup>3</sup> mediated by various communication and information

<sup>2</sup> *Game of Thrones*, HBO, Season 8, episode 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Public sphericles* have been defined as constitutive forms of smaller-scale public spheres that normally refer to smaller-scale citizen groups interacting around not-so-visible local interests in larger geopolitical forms (Gitlin, 1998).

technologies. What is new about the case is not so much the vast popularity of this story, nor are the multiple forums –online and face-to-face– in which fans and audiences debate passionately, share and intervene in the creation of GoT's *paratexts*.<sup>4</sup> These complex symbolic practices have become normalized as evidenced by a growing number of academic publications in the field of cultural and communication studies (Amaya Trujillo & Charlois Allende, 2018; Gjelsvik & Schubart, 2016; Krishnamurthy, 2013; Orozco & Miller, 2017).

What is new from landmark cases such as GoT and other transmedia stories (*Star Wars*, *Alias*, *Nip/Tuck*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Mad Men*, *Narcos*, etc.) is the manifest recognition by specialists and audiences of the *melodramatic character* that permeates several of these texts and contexts at crucial moments both of their *textuality* and the consumption of these narratives (Brown & Abbott, 2007; Desilet, 2006; Smit, 2014; Zeller-Jacques, 2014). The emerging identification of melodrama as a constituent element of contemporary production and reception practices that transcends literary, television or cinematographic genres, and which relocates it as a constitutive modality of modern experience, represents one of the most significant epistemological movements of the last 15 years within the Anglo-Saxon social sciences and humanities. Of course, within the field of communication and cultural studies, canonical works such as those of Radway (1984), Ang (1985), Brunson (1993), Brooks (1995), Gledhill (2000)<sup>5</sup> and Singer (2001), have been crucial in the

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this project, the general definition of *paratexts* was taken by Gray's (2010) excellent work in this regard: "A paratext is both "distinct from" and alike –or, I will argue, intrinsically part of– the text... paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them... Paratexts often take a tangible form, as with posters, videogames, podcasts, reviews, or merchandise..." (p. 6).

<sup>5</sup> "Melodrama, as an organizing modality of the genre system, works at western culture's most sensitive cultural and aesthetic boundaries, embodying class, gender, and ethnicity in a process of imaginary identification, differentiation, contact, and opposition... melodramatic modality, personifying social forces

production of a feminist critical perspective that has analytically linked the everyday practices of the cultural consumption of melodrama –in the press, literature, film and television– with complex political and sociocultural (micro and macro) contexts. These investigations, through their transdisciplinary paradigmatic functioning, have been central in drawing the first formulations that today make it possible to think of melodrama as a narrative aesthetic or *transgenre mode*.

As we will see later, these epistemological shifts that identify modernity as the epicenter of radical transformations in the social structures of feeling (Williams, 1961) –which in turn are constitutive of singular cultural practices around melodramatic transmedia narratives– have also their co-foundational intellectual genealogies in Latin America. In that respect, since the 1980's, Martín-Barbero's work had displayed a sophisticated socio-economic, historical and philosophical perspective on the cultural formations of modernity (Dorcé, 2005, 2015; Herlinghaus, 2002).

While Grimson and Varela (1999) have been pointing to the persistence of a systemic neglect by Anglo-Saxon hegemonic academies towards Latin American work in communication and culture for twenty years now, we now confirm the prevalence of it in much of the recent academic work on melodrama.<sup>6</sup> In such conjuncture it is productive to recognize the power of some central postulates produced in Martín-Barbero's work, as they enable a nuanced reading on the self-proclaimed “innovation” held in recent challenges that suggest overcoming “genre-centrism”, which, while legitimate and necessary, does not seem to recognize its own ethnocentric bias when ignoring Latin American research in the field and its contributions with respect to the melodramatic *modes* in the audiovisual (Mittell, 2015; Rooney, 2013; Williams, 2014; Zarzosa, 2010).

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as psychic energies and producing moral identities in the clash of opposites, is committed to binaries which bring the ‘others’ of official ideology into visibility” (Gledhill in Goldberb, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> There are, of course a few exceptions; for example, the work of David Morley and Nick Couldry has developed a productive dialogue with Martín-Barbero's work as well as with that of García-Canclini (Rincón, 2018).

More than a heritage claim of knowledge, the recognition of the specificity and richness of Latin American intellectual traditions that have converged around the production of knowledge about popular culture, hybridization and power, allows us to identify affinities and continuities on a transnational level, as well as contextually local disruptions and singularities. Especially when it comes to the new centrality of melodrama as a dominant mode in global contemporary affectivity. The growing expansion and consolidation of socio-digital networks, driven by the computer and entertainment industry, tend to homogenize operational protocols, electronic devices and even social provisions (Winocur & Sánchez, 2016). Such transformations have reconfigured the landscape and transmedia dynamics that frame melodrama flows, especially through television.

#### FROM FEUILLETON TO TELENOVELA AND BEYOND: THE MELODRAMA AS A MEDIATION/MATRIX OF A COMPLEX TRANSMEDIALITY

Transmedia melodrama in Latin America is an heir of European aesthetic-narrative tradition that derives from the exchanges between popular cultural formations and the symbolic practices of the aristocratic elites of the eighteenth century. The telenovela in particular has been characterized as the point of convergence of various sensitivities that mobilize affective dimensions of the socio-historical experience. A compendium of structures of feeling, which, while stratified in institutionalized power practices, are also powerfully and expressively deployed onto all sort of televisual representations of life. The telenovela materializes and stages crucial dimensions of human suffering and tragedy lived by societies subjected to multiple and contradictory modernization processes. For its part, melodrama as a *technology of feelings*, structures the narrative and aesthetic forms of the telenovela, while providing some “emotional coherence” to the complex cultural configurations that have been deployed in Latin America for more than seven decades.

In this sense, Latin American research on the subject has always considered the symbolic media forms in relation to their production and consumption contexts, taking into account the historical determinations of those environments, as well as the melodramatic texts themselves.

Hence, for Martín-Barbero (1993) the analysis of transmedia narrative genres is crucial: television through its genres:

Stimulates cultural competences and recognition of cultural differences. Genres, as articulators of serial storytelling constitute a mediation between the production logic and that of consumption, between the logic of the format and the ways in which the format is used (pp. 220-221).

Similar to Neale's founding work (1980) on media genres, Martín-Barbero (1987) notes that "the rules of genres establish the basic pattern of formats and anchor cultural recognition among different social groups" (p. 241). It is essential for the Spanish-Colombian author to distance himself from literary perspectives on genre. The conception of genre as a property of the text or as a taxonomy –as in semi-structural approaches– does not help to understand that:

Genre is not something that happens to the text, but rather something that passes through and because of the text, in that it is less of a structure and its possible combinations, and more of the [social coding and decoding] competences (p. 241).

Therefore, Martín-Barbero advocates –following Wolf's work– for a conceptual displacement which characterizes the genre as a *communicative strategy*. Thus, the genre acquires analytical visibility in a dialogical sense because it appeals to its own "communicativeness", which allows us to analyze it also in its textual iterations. The strategic movement to advance analysis beyond the requirements of the literary canons of the genre makes it possible for us to identify the social functions of melodrama, as well as its "methodological relevance" (p. 241).

For Martín-Barbero, the conventional notion used even in the 1980s had to be reworked to accommodate a complex conceptualization of cultural dynamics. Communication is not one-sided but a process of shared cultural experiences, common symbolic resources and emotional expectations constituting common sense. As he eloquently expresses it:

The function of the genres makes it obvious that the narrative, textual competence is not only a condition of the sender but also of the receiver. Any television viewer knows, when the text/story has been interrupted, the many ways that the story can be finished, and is capable of summarizing the work or of comparing and classifying it with other stories. As speakers of the 'language' of genres, the television viewer, like the natives of a culture with no written language, are unaware of the systematic rules of grammar, but are quite capable of speaking the language. This is a new way of looking at television texts. If seen as moments of negotiation, genres cannot be approached in terms of semantics or syntax. They require the construction of a communicative pragmatics that can capture the operation of their recognition by a cultural community. The texts of a genre are a stock of meanings constituting an organization that is more of a complex of interrelations than a set of distinct molecules. Consequently, a genre cannot be analyzed by following a list of representative categories, but by searching for the architecture which links the different semantic contents of the diverse significant topics. A genre functions by constituting a "world" in which no element has a fixed value and meaning (1993, pp. 223-224)

Thus, genre is one of the socio-symbolic mediations that requires to be explored in order to understand the historical relationships of telenovelas –and other formats– with residual components of previous sociocultural formations that latently inhabit social memory, precisely like the case of melodrama.

One singularity that distinguishes Martín-Barbero's work from its Anglo-American counterparts lies in the strategic consideration of the historical specificity of Latin American modernity. That is, the understanding of the residual legacy of colonial contradictions –and their postcolonial becoming– not only as echoes of the past, but as engines of social signification, has resulted in a different characterization of the processes of ethnic and socioeconomic stratification that codified the continent's diverse maternities. These considerations project contrasting notions –with regard to Europe and the United States– about the role that a genre such as melodrama has played for popular cultures and its organic link with the dynamics of urbanization and social technification.

A hybrid genre as melodrama has been constituted as a narrative node that in an allegorical way has historically represented –in various media– the violent processes of incorporation of the popular classes into key spaces of a heterogeneous, unequal and multitemporal modernity. Melodrama condenses in its history the moments of emergency and visibility of the masses, the conversion of the popular/ethnic into massive and the popularization of the mass.

Thus, melodrama interpellates and mobilizes –at the same time– heterogeneous structures of feeling that can be anachronistic to each other, generating pleasure and joy in the audiences that consume such stories. This would be a key notion to understand intercultural relationships mediated by communication technologies intervened by the melodramatic ethos. As Herlinghaus (2002) puts it:

If we talk about the intermedia character of melodrama and we refer to its versatility which allows it to cross various genres and media... as well as generating interstitial spaces and new conceptual bridges, we see that this versatility almost always responds to a re-articulation of non-discursive “excesses” that are, however, parts of a narrative or linked to a narrative matrix (p. 40).

We find in this reading of melodrama inspired by the work of Martín-Barbero, an approach that recognizes in melodrama’s semantic operations that transcend the genre –and that can well be read as indications of a conceptualization that anticipates the usefulness of understanding melodrama also as a *mode*– in as much as they affect fragments of a narrative and that are ultimately connected with a matrix of melodramatic type. Using Ricoeur’s work, Herlinghaus (2002) notes: “the melodramatic shows that beneath institutionalized rationality (the discourse) imaginaries of *life and action* are at work, [imaginaries] from which in turn a symbolic access to the spheres of ‘ordered’ imagination is negotiated” (pp. 40-41).

The vitality of melodrama refers to a number of operational properties of the genre that nurture its resilience over time and space. Martín-Barbero identifies a series of semantic continuities in various popular expressive forms that are historically configured from the



melodramatic matrix; theater, circus, carnival, musical lyrics (*tangos*, *corridos*, *vallenatos* and *boleros*), serialized literature, film, radio and television.<sup>7</sup> The peculiar stylization of the melodramatic narrative involves the staging of dramatic situations and disjunctions in which binary moral oppositions presented to the agents of fiction often reduce the spectrum of ontological possibilities of a story; good versus evil, rich versus poor, virtue against vice, etc. The Manichean outlining of moral values, the spectacularization of the emotional reactions typical of melodrama and the happy/unhappy narrative closure take on a completely different meaning when reviewed from the epistemological perspective suggested by Martín-Barbero. This framing involves not only the consideration of the long duration of the generic fabric, but also a systematic analysis of key mediations that constitute dynamic areas of reproduction and social innovation. That is, “the places from which the constrictions that delimit and shape the social materiality and cultural expressiveness of television...: family daily life, social temporality and cultural competence” (Martín-Barbero, 1987, p. 243).

A fundamental feature of Martín-Barbero's work –and the then emerging field of Latin American cultural studies–<sup>8</sup> lies in their critique of *mediacentrism*, since communication and communicative action are essentially addressed in their relationship with broader sociocultural contexts from which the televisual emerges always determined by the uniqueness of local conjunctures and contexts. The quotidian and its intricate social practices of coexistence and survival represent an arena of tensions in which the construction of social meaning is realized. Popular festivities, cinema, press, television and radio are not simple

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term *resilience* analogously, in the sense that Holling (1973) used it to refer to the ability of a socio-ecological system to remain immutable in the face of environmental disturbances, maintaining its essentially immutable structure and function.

<sup>8</sup> Much of Martín-Barbero's work referred to here must be understood in relation to the readings, dialogues, exchanges and tensions that he then maintained with colleagues in the region. An excellent theoretical mapping of such regional exchanges is synthesized by the work of Grimson and Varela (1999).

agents of ideological domination in as much as popular culture would be a territory within which hegemony does not achieve its absolute dominance as difference imposes its own limits. It is crucial not to lose sight of the deep political sense of such critical approach to the constitutive modernity of transmedia practices in Latin America. In particular, it is essential to read contextualized melodramatic socio-textual instances that, as Signorelli pointed out –referring to massification processes– reveal emerging forms “of social relationships and conflict” (Signorelli in Martín-Barbero, 1987, p. 249).

These approaches remain pertinent as evidenced by a robust body of research carried out over the past 15 years on the telenovela format and its melodramatic configurations in inter and transnational contexts of production and consumption (Orozco & Vassallo de Lopes, 2017; Piñón, 2014). These works analyze the complex modalities in which melodrama persistently manifests itself in a format that is not static and has experienced in par with its contexts of production and consumption unusual formal transformations. For example, the emergence of novel subformats that combine the daily seriality of the telenovela with the cinematic aesthetic motifs of the American and English multigenic series of quality *television*<sup>9</sup> (Amaya, 2013; Dorcé, 2005; Gómez, Miller & Dorcé, 2014; Smith, 2014). This broad compendium of analysis identifies a multiplicity of local singularities and specific cases of stylistic hybridization that anticipate formal qualities of transmedia melodrama that precisely denote a level of complexity analogous to what Mittell calls Complex TV. I would like to suggest here that the Anglo-Saxon formulation on the complex nature of television echoes what Latin American works have been thinking in recent decades.

### COMPLEX TV AND MELODRAMATIC MODE

Complex television would not necessarily be a recent paradigmatic condition but rather an approach –for Anglo-American studies– that rescues, systematizes and updates a set of research traditions that have always conceived the television from a perspective that integrates

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<sup>9</sup> See Feuer (1984).

the complex sociocultural interrelationships around the production, circulation and consumption of television. In particular, Mittell's approach seeks to recalibrate the way we conventionally describe and analyze the relationships between text, context and their various forms of reception. This of course entails a more detailed characterization of the difference between genres, formats and discursive modes in the field of audio-visual intertextuality:

Complex television is a storytelling mode and set of associated production and reception practices that span a wide range of programs across an array of genres. Television genres are cultural categories that discursively bundle texts together within particular contexts, not simply sets of textual conventions (Mittell, 2015, p. 563).

Mittell argues that a central feature of complex television lies in melodrama's omnipresence not as a genre but as a mode. Taking into account the axes derived from Williams'<sup>10</sup> seminal work on *The Wire*, Mittell (2015) posits that: "Should be construed as a narrative mode that uses suspense to portray 'moral legibility', offering an engaging emotional response to feel the difference between competing moral sides as manifested through forward-moving storytelling" (p. 591).

Melodrama then, would be the symbolic entity that makes it possible and enhances the audiences' affective involvement with characters and dramatic situations through a *soap operas* moral scheme that is not necessarily reductionist, Manichean or excessive as in American foundational soap operas. These claims would be seeking to transcend the usual rationalist/modernist<sup>11</sup> prejudice that defines melodramatic

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<sup>10</sup> In the Latin American case, some of the most consistent works around melodrama are represented by the researches of Mazziotti (2002) who also recovers Williams' work to refer to both Latin American cinematography and soap operas.

<sup>11</sup> "These distinctions, at their most reductive, echo the long-standing stereotypical mapping of rationality as male and emotion as female or the gendered dichotomy between thinking and feeling, a set of dualities that map onto the modes of affirmational versus transformative fandom" (Mittell, 2015, p. 505).

sensationalism as irrationally excessive and aesthetically saturated. This line of argumentation would be echoing Gledhill's valuable contributions, thus responding in addition to the work of Brooks (1995), Singer (2001) and others, who, while recognizing the social operations of melodrama, still appear at certain passages of their works as a kind of cultural aberration.

Mittell persuasively argues of the imperative need to rescue the feminist impetus characteristic of the founding work of female academics on romance and soap operas in the 1970's and 1980's, because:

By highlighting complex television's distinctive take on serial melodrama, I consider how it functions as a "narrative technology of gender" per Robyn Warhol's model, and argue against the claim that prime time serials "masculinize" the traditionally feminine realm of soap operas (Mittell, 2015, p. 477).

Globally successful series such as *Alias*, *Buffy*, *Homeland*, *Damages* or *The Killing* would be epitome of a production strategy in which female protagonists deploy a performance of a non-masculinistic affective rationality. Even series centering on male protagonists such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men* generate melodramatic representations that challenge dominant definitions of masculinity. In other words, melodrama destabilizes the purported consistency of genres conventionally identified as masculine –action, science fiction and crime suspense– by intervening procedural narratives with dramatic "effeminate"<sup>12</sup> motifs that accentuate a dramaturgy that catalyzes deeply moved and cathartically emotional responses such as crying. A gesture usually suppressed by heteropatriarcal masculinity.

Complex television would be announcing a modality of observation on the ways in which melodrama is being articulated with contemporary experiences of transmediality. Both Latin American and Anglo-American traditions have regarded melodrama as a constitutive component of the

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<sup>12</sup> It is essential to stress that Mittell's perspective here does not denote an essentialist position in any way. Rather, it points to the way gender roles have traditionally been built around affectivity and emotional sensitivity.

experience of modernity. While they differ in historical and geopolitical emphasis, they allow us to document –from our diverse localities– the ways in which melodrama is now being analyzed, even beyond fictional audiovisual narratives. Just as the forerunners Reguillo and Colón researched –at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century– the melodramatic discursive display beyond the formats of television fiction, today we find encouraging signs in that regard. Research work from other areas of the humanities and social sciences is identifying how the melodramatic mode is also structuring discourses in the news formats as well as in civil society organizations and parliamentary politics (Anker, 2014; Griffiths, 2018; Mujica & Bachmann, 2017; Wells, 2013).

The increasing consolidation of new forms of articulation of television in VoD platforms, but also significant modifications in the daily practices of audiovisual consumption mediated by mobile devices and their imbrication with socio-digital networks –such as Facebook, Twitter and others– force us to identify emergent ways in which substantive social stories are determined both in their production and in their reception by melodramatic discursive modalities. It is my contention that is fundamental –following the work of Martín-Barbero in line with Mittell's– to continue exploring how even digital interactions between internet users/audiences regarding their appropriations of various types of media texts display what I have identified –elsewhere– as the melodramatic episteme. That is, that logic that tends to reduce and simplify the origins of all tensions of human power, emotional afflictions and their solutions corresponding to the sphere of family, love, religion and individual agency in power relations, in the terms of a Manichean binarism that rarely accepts another possible causality or complexity (Dorcé, 2005, p. 302). The increasing social polarization resulting from deep socio-economic and environmental injustices at a global level, seems to be fostering the proliferation of very unreflective affective responses from diverse audiences, in the face of news or fictional accounts seeking to disinform or guide social dispositions by nurturing cognitive biases that ultimately generate the viability of what is now known as the post-truth (Aparici & Marín, 2019).

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