TELENOVELAS AND SOCIAL DEBATE
Fiction as a Public Space of Discussion in Brazil
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**Every evening from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., Monday to Saturday, Globo, Brazil’s biggest television channel, broadcasts its serials all around the country. The melodramatic fictions known across South America as *telenovelas* are watched by almost eighty million viewers out of an estimated population of 170 million. They are part of everyday life and change around every eight months, in a cycle that has been constant since the mid-1960s. Globo’s scriptwriters tackle contemporary issues such as agrarian reform, alcoholism, human cloning, or kidnapping. In 2001, England’s Prince Charles presented the channel with an international prize for “social responsibility,” the Business in the Community Awards for Excellence, as a result of the notable social engagement of its television series. As indicated by Globo’s slogan which appeared frequently in the press that year, “Take part in a movement for social change: watch *novelas*,” the channel directors presented telenovelas as educational tools.**

The scriptwriters attempt above all to provoke national debates. When a telenovela is launched, only the first thirty episodes have been written and filmed. The scriptwriters write the next 180 episodes according to how the public and social players like the Church, the state, or associations react. These controversies feed the scripts. At the start of a series, nobody knows the characters’ fates.

The popularity of these commercial serials with a melodramatic aesthetic, watched and discussed nationwide, makes them an interesting subject for anthropological study. As part of a reflection on the relationship between reality and fiction, I will particularly examine the labor of the scriptwriters. How do they see their creation? How do they produce their stories? Based on my interviews with Globo’s scriptwriters, on press articles, and on an internal analysis of four

1. Translator’s note: All quotations in this article from Portuguese-language sources have been back-translated from the French-language version of this article.
contemporary telenovelas, this study looks at how scriptwriters represent social reality, and tries to understand how they use fiction to provoke social debate.

**The Political and Social Concerns of Scriptwriters**

In the 1950s in Brazil, the first TV soaps were used as a support for broadcasting commercials, following the North American soap-opera model. Scriptwriters often came from radio stations that broadcast radio melodramas called radionovelas. They wrote simple tales based around a love story, or adapted Cuban and Argentinian scripts. During the 1960s, the military’s seizing power and setting up a dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985 modified the status of writing for television. The military censorship of artistic creation led playwrights to write for television. Censorship of television soaps seemed less strict than it was for theater plays aimed at a more erudite population. Most authors who had hitherto refused to work on commercial productions saw telenovelas as a way of “communicating with the Brazilian people:”

My generation worked for the emergence of a popular theater. In the end, we succeeded in making political theater, but never popular theater..., because we never managed to conquer the mass general public. We had an antibourgeois play on stage, watched by a bourgeois audience. When I was invited to work in television, it was the opportunity to reach a huge popular audience of thirty to forty million people... I decided to bring my theater thematic to television. That also meant bringing my political, social, and aesthetic concerns into the telenovela, which was a popular genre that was seen as subliterary (Dias Gomes, Festival 24 Images, Paris, March 1998).

With the expansion of the television network and the urbanization of the country, Brazilian scriptwriters introduced everyday references into their plots. They “nationalized” themes, while keeping the melodramatic aesthetics of the original telenovelas. In the serial *Beto Rockefeller* (TV Tupi, 1968–1969), Bráulio Pedroso described the new ways of life and the hero's social-climbing ambitions, marking the transition to more urban themes. In *Dancin’ Days* (Rede Globo, 1978–1979), Gilberto Braga put the world of discos on screen.

Although scriptwriters of this time saw themselves as politically engaged artists, they could not express their ideas openly until after the dictatorship ended. Dias Gomes’s novela *Roque Santeiro* was banned in 1975 and filmed only in 1985 once democracy returned to the country. For psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl, the series represented “Brazil’s false miracle and the attempt to get back to the country’s [democratic] ‘roots’ in the 1980s” (Kehl 1986, 319). The hero, Roque Santeiro, who makes statues of saints in the fictional little town of Asa Branca in Northeast Brazil, disappears after looting the town's church. Everyone thinks he has died in a shooting and he becomes a martyr. When he returns seventeen years

2. These four telenovelas broadcast on Globo between 1996 and 2001 are: *O Rei do gado* (*The King of Livestock*), *Torre de Babel* (*Tower of Babel*), *Laços de família* (*Family Ties*), and *Porto dos milagres* (*The Door of Miracles*).
later, he discovers a flourishing trade in effigies of himself being sold as sacred objects. Thus, his return endangers this whole economy based on his disappearance. The economic and political interests of the people who have made their fortune from his lie are at stake. This telenovela, regularly cited in my interviews with scriptwriters or television viewers, appears as a political reference and a symbol of scriptwriters’ social engagement.

Today, scriptwriters can tackle sensitive issues in current affairs, such as agrarian reform. However, the satirical tone and the political critiques that followed the return to democracy have subsided and been replaced by more educational themes that aim to inform the public and shape Brazilian citizens. Telenovelas have become key vehicles for health campaigns such as the fight against leukemia through bone-marrow donation. In advertising campaigns praising the channel’s social commitment, the eight themes highlighted were: health, the landless, drugs, alcoholism, ecology, racism, missing children, and AIDS.

**Reformulating Current Affairs: In Search of a Universal Language**

Globo presents telenovelas as didactic tools, but these serials are also the channel’s most profitable productions. Nora Mazziotti, an Argentinian researcher who has studied telenovelas in South America, estimates that on average a “telenovela becomes profitable in its second month of broadcasting” (Mazziotti 2001, 53). The channel offers three telenovelas per day, from Monday to Saturday: one at 6:00 p.m., one at 7:00 p.m., and one at 9:00 p.m. Sometimes Globo also schedules a miniseries of a few episodes, at 10:00 p.m. There are five-minute commercial breaks every ten minutes during the telenovelas. The channel management imposes audience constraints on the production teams, so that advertising time can be sold at the highest possible price. If the channel thinks the audience is too small, it can replace the author or decide not to reemploy him or her.

Although the scriptwriters take inspiration from the country’s current affairs to fulfill their “educational mission,” they reformulate events, constantly seeking a “successful formula.” In the first edition of his manual *Roteiro. Arte e técnica de escrever para cinema e televisão* (*The Art and Technique of Writing for Cinema and Television*), Doc Comparato, author of numerous telenovelas, emphasizes the difference between a film by a Brazilian new-wave director, Glauber Rocha, “with an idea in his head and a camera in his hand,” and a film for a wide audience. He wants to forge the tools to “build a scenario that is as classical as possible” (Comparato 1983, 9). He explains:

> With the existence of mass culture, influenced by ever wider markets, it has become necessary for a film to have a universal dimension, so that it can be understood and accepted by the diverse cultures within the market (Comparato 1983, 34).

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3. Rural workers, left aside, demand the expropriation and reallocation of abandoned land belonging to livestock farmers, in order to cultivate it and live decently. The constitution authorizes the expropriation of fallow agricultural land, but there are bloody fights between the two sides.
The scriptwriters whom I interviewed spoke of mastering narrative rules that are seen to be universal for composing a story. Although they did not directly mention authors like Aristotle or Vladimir Propp, they drew on elements of their theories to generate “rules” that they consider to be classical. In his manual, Doc Comparato defines the three qualities of the script: *logos* (which addresses the audience’s rational mind), *pathos* (which addresses their emotions), and *ethos*, which concerns the orator’s style (Comparato 1983, 15). He borrows these techniques from Aristotle’s description of the art of ancient oratory prowess in *Rhetoric*.

Literary and cinematographic theories become tools for creating novelas. They represent know-how accumulated in manuals inspired by North American works on script creation, and are taught in Globo’s internal dramaturgy courses in the form of formulae, or “little rules” (in the words of scriptwriter Vincent Villari).

The scriptwriters emphasize the term “melodramatize.” They choose scenarios with high dramatic potential. Conflictual situations such as serious illness, separations, and love rivalry within families feed these stories, which are a mixture of real life and fiction. The scriptwriters often cite nineteenth-century French novelists, primarily Balzac, who is regarded as one of the “classics” and who remains a major source of inspiration. *La Comédie humaine* is presented as an inexhaustible source of ideas that serves as a foundation for building and developing plots. Scriptwriter Décio Coimbra, who has trained many of his peers at Globo’s dramaturgy workshop, explains that:

> You will come across Balzac’s characters in all the novelas. It’s easier for you to identify Romeo and Juliet, because it’s a better-known work. You won’t pick out the others, but someone who knows Balzac will recognize certain characters from certain stories. To go back to what we were saying, if the scriptwriter has half a brain, he’ll reread the classics attentively (2001).

The scriptwriters seem to be looking for “timeless” human dramas drawn from past centuries, in order to give characters the “universal” dimension required to reach the widest possible audience.

An internal analysis of telenovelas reveals the almost structuralist construction of the tales and the cyclical time in which the events occur. At the start of a novela, a dramatic event disturbs the initial equilibrium of the relationships between the characters. They enter the time of reparation and a new equilibrium. When I interviewed Décio Coimbra, he emphasized the structural construction of the stories, saying that:

> Let’s state the obvious, if I put the goodie with the baddie, I already know it’s going to work. Everyone knows there’s a protagonist and an antagonist… . There have to be little rules, this is the way people like to hear stories. If you tell any fairytale to a child, that’s how it’s told (2001).

This logic is similar to Vladimir Propp’s analysis of fairytales. In fact, we might apply a comment made by Evguéní Mélétinski in discussing Propp’s observations on the internal dynamics of fairytales directly to telenovelas:
The relationships between the hero and the antagonist aggressor are generally based on an opposition: ours/theirs, which is projected onto various levels: the house/the forest, our kingdom/another kingdom, own family/step family (Evguéni Mélétinski 1970, 246).

In Porto dos milagres (Globo, 2001), inspired by Jorge Amado’s famous novel, Mar morto (1936), the main novela scriptwriters, Aguinaldo Silva and Ricardo Linhares, showed the hatred between two brothers in two morally and geographically defined clans. The two towns the brothers live in are opposite extremes of a single urban space: on the one hand the upper town of the major authorities and the bourgeoisie in their big houses, and on the other hand the lower town around the fishing port, with the maritime activity and modest homes of the poorest citizens. The contrast between the characters is projected on to that between the upper town and the lower town. The new rich who have taken the hero’s place by killing his father represent evil, and the lowly fishermen who help him symbolize good. In the citadel of the upper town, a mother and son are driven by ferocious hatred in their competition over the love of the patriarch; whereas, the lower town is governed by solidarity and love. The “law of the quay,” which encourages respect for honor and courage, contrasts with the rule of money and power that reigns in the upper town. Such oppositional juxtapositions are also seen in other telenovelas.

If we continue the internal analysis of Brazilian serials, we can see that social conflicts are displaced onto a personal level. The representation of the world is organized around the family and made particularly clear if we examine family trees.

The past is vitally important for the action taking place in the present. In the moment when the action takes place, the characters are already linked by ties and relationships, and this directly affects the present. Every character has “family secrets” in his or her backstory. Heredity is important in the temporality of serials. The weight of the past affects the characters’ fates, and this is one of the key elements of the melodrama. I borrow the concept of “eroticization of social conflicts” from Christian Geffray, in order to describe this reformulation of events in the telenovelas (Geffray 1995).

In 1996, Globo broadcast the novela O rei do gado. By analyzing the main characters’ family trees, we can see the familialist logic that governs the resolution of conflicts. There is conflict between two groups at the extremes of the social hierarchy: landowners and peasants from the Landless Movement (MST). The antagonists find a focal point in the central couple: a rich landowner falls in love with a woman who has joined the MST. The family schema shows the relationship between them: they are cousins. The love story of a landowner and a woman from the MST becomes the story of two cousins in a family conflict, destined to fall in love. Benedito Ruy Barbosa eroticizes social conflict to the extreme. At the end of the novela, the birth of a child symbolically reunites the opposed parties. Meanwhile, the social hierarchy is also maintained when it is revealed that the poor, landless heroine is also the legitimate heir to another plot of land usurped by her uncle.
At every stage of writing the scenario, the professionals attempt to play on the viewers’ emotions. According to director Paulo Grisolli, who worked for Rede Globo for twenty years, the key is to “transform the script into an emotional experience for the audience” (cited in Tufte 2000, 133). Directors accentuate the melodramatic elements of the script. They use lots of close-ups to emphasize the tears that pepper the sequences: tears of joy, tears of anguish, and tears of compassion. The characters’ faces express their emotions. The events shown become an emotional experience in which subjectivity reigns. Décio Coimbra explained to me that “if you can’t imagine her prostituting herself [when you look at her], television isn’t interested. It has to be written on her face. It’s better for the melodrama.”

The musical component, which is central in the telenovela world, intensifies the emotional atmosphere and contributes to the narration: “Evidently, the music is directly associated with the viewer’s emotional and affective investment, and that’s what makes it so important” (Gardies 1993, 22). Globo has its own sound-processing department. They are briefed about coming novelas so that musical themes can be composed to match the “spirit” of the serial. Music also helps to build the story, increase suspense, and emphasize feelings of love and joy. Moreover, music can be associated with a specific character or place, thus becoming a given character’s musical signature. It structures the viewer’s emotions. Over the eight months of broadcasting, this auditory universe is also heard on the radio, in people’s homes, at parties; the tune is hummed and the words sung all around the country.

The theatrical and overwrought acting might surprise French viewers who are not accustomed to telenovelas, but it is part of the genre’s aesthetics. When I interviewed Vincent Villari, who is Globo’s youngest scriptwriter and recently trained at its dramaturgy workshop, he emphasized the importance of the viewer identifying with the character (pathos) as the key to the successful formula that allows the viewer to “sympathize and enter into the [character’s] drama.”

The dramatization of the events places the characters in a mythical time and space, separate from viewers’ everyday experience. Accordingly, the scriptwriters create an imaginary Brazil, in parallel to everyday life, in which a discursive interplay is established.

**Controversies and the Collective Writing of a Fiction**

By reformulating the events of current affairs in the long time of pathos, and by deliberately creating family imbalances, the scriptwriters create a public space for discussion, in which they appeal to viewers. Lauro César Muniz lays claim to the creation of this space:

“In the 1970s, we created a very strong novela genre, we looked into raw themes in the country’s recent history, we discussed issues, we opened a space in which society could debate them (Expresso, December 7, 1996, 50).

Viewers’ reactions are not limited to discussing the series in daily conversation with those around them. Certain groups and individuals express themselves
directly to Globo or in the press, in the hope of influencing the storyline. Even though viewers distinguish between the serials and reality, telenovelas always cause controversy. These controversies are part of the writing ritual. The audience intervenes in two ways. Viewers attempt to influence the characters’ fates by judging the morality of their actions. This is what I have called the court of public opinion. The second type of debate happens on the stage of the social theater. It affects the representation of the characters and involves groups of people who defend common interests. These controversies give rise to many discussions that are relayed by the press.

Globo has rationalized its understanding of its audience by asking the quantitative survey institute IBOPE⁴ to measure audiences, and by commissioning surveys from qualitative survey institutes to collect viewers’ opinions on plots and characters. The frequent use of the phrases “He/she deserves it” and “He/she should be punished” in viewers’ discourse, in interviews, in the reports of qualitative survey institutes, or in the specialized press highlights the judicial logic of the way conflicts are resolved. In this collective emotional space, the viewers judge the characters. The root of the verb merecer (to deserve) is mer, meaning “to attract (by a magical force) what one has earned” (Picoche 2002). The root of the word implies a superstitious relationship of cause and effect between events. Good behavior leads the hero towards the path of social inclusion and happiness. The recurring phrase “He/she deserves it” evokes a higher force that bestows justice in an ideal way, according to the laws of the imaginary Brazil of the telenovelas. During my interview with Flavia Lins e Silva, the scriptwriter compared the randomness of a real event to the narrative logic of the novela:

A fiancée was waiting for her future husband at the airport, and as the plane was arriving, it crashed on the runway. The fiancé died in the accident, before the horrified eyes of his betrothed. This is a true story. However, something like this could never happen in a novella (2001).

To return to the analogy with fairytales, “The sequence of events has its own laws” (Propp 1968, chap. 2).

There are many references to Judeo-Christian morality. In his analysis of Latin American melodramatic cinema, Silvia Oroz describes the same narrative resources (1992). Love is a core value. It can excuse the actions of negative characters and authorize the social ascension of others. Suffering is used to provoke compassion. However, depending on whether the character is male or female and on the social environment in which the plot occurs, characters are not judged in the same way. Men who cheat on their wives are often seen as seducers, whereas unfaithful women appear as a threat to the family.

Using another frequent phrase, “That’s how things should be,” viewers give the novella the status of a morality tale. The discursive interplay permits the invention of an ideal Brazil that is independent from reality.

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⁴ Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics.
Associations, the Church, or the state participate in another kind of debate by challenging the representation of certain characters in the novela. They solicit the attention of scriptwriters and the public regarding the importance of the image telenovelas present of the country. These controversies about the stakes of representation call upon viewers’ reason, in opposition to the more spontaneous, emotional judgments of the court of public opinion. While viewers base their judgments on empathy, the associations and Church or state representatives call for a more rational approach. These actors in society attempt to change the representations by emphasizing the relationship between truth and fiction. They claim that the images can influence audience behavior:

The character of the middle-class prostitute in the 8:00 p.m. novela sparks a debate about the novela’s influence on the behavior of Brazilians (“Laços polêmicos,” Jornal do Brasil, July 9, 2001).

Social actors are even keener to intervene when the national scope of the debates broadens the reach of their assertions. On the social stage, social debates, which recur from one telenovela to the next, are another phase in the writing ritual.

For example, the representatives of the black movement protested against the representation of black people in Globo’s television serial. In 2004, with the broadcasting of the 7:00 p.m. telenovela, Da cor do pecado (The Color of Sin), the many debates triggered by “Globo’s first black heroine” and her blonde antagonist showed that this issue struck a chord in Brazil. This “first” is presented as a new stage in the history of telenovelas. Analyzing this decision to cast a black heroine, a journalist connected it to the emergence of a black middle class who were potential buyers of the products advertised during the commercial breaks (O Estado de São Paulo, January 16, 2004).

The Catholic Church regularly speaks out to criticize Globo’s telenovelas. From the first days of Torre de Babel being broadcast, the archbishop of Rio, Dom Eugenio, protested against the immorality of this novela, claiming that it threatened family values. The themes of violence, homosexuality, and drugs, and the erotic force of certain scenes provoked the “anger” of the Church. In a long article, the archbishop criticized “those responsible and the organizers, who will have to answer to God.” Hence, the programs are sometimes seen as the source of the ills afflicting Brazilian society.

Two years later, the filming of a marriage scene for the novela Laços de família in the chapel of a Rio university once more angered the Church, which opposed the “ethical and moral values” spread by Globo’s 8:00 p.m. novela: “Camila is impregnated by her mother’s ex-lover!” The violent scenes with a young prostitute also greatly upset the Church. The archbishop of Rio spoke out against the drama by banning the filming of the wedding scene in the chapel of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Despite the ban, Globo managed to film the scene

5. “Dom Eugenio attaque Torre de Babel,” Jornal do Brasil, May 29, 1998, four days after the first episode was broadcast.
in the chapel of Sao Pedro de Alcântara, in the Urca area. The metropolitan curia, which had refused to authorize the production to use the churches in its territory as filming studios, reacted by threatening to annul the religious authority of the chapel. The Church would no longer recognize any religious act taking place there. This threat would be realized if the wedding scene that had been filmed was broadcast. In a text signed by Monsenhor Arnaldo Beltrami, spokesman for the Archdiocese of São Paulo, “the curia of the city of São Paulo backs the criticisms of Globo’s novela, *Laços de família.*” The text praises the curia of the city of Rio de Janeiro for refusing to let Globo film scenes for the marriage of “Edu and Camila” in its churches, and declares “the family values, conjugal relationships, and moral behavior in this novela against Christian morality.” After the Church’s strong reaction, the press covered the controversy and Globo reshot the scene elsewhere at great cost, according to articles printed in the group’s newspapers and reproduced in the rest of the national press. In an ironic twist, these positions provoked increased discussion about the novela, and consequently boosted the audience. Such controversies allow the Church to assert its position about the novelas and to reaffirm its moral values by threatening the offending parties with reprisals.

**The Transformation of Scenarios and the Logic of Conflict Resolution**

Let us take the example of the novela *Porto dos milagres* (see above), which rapidly gained a large audience. The first and only discussion group took place on April 5, 2001, two months after the series was launched. The Greater São Paulo women’s meeting allowed a better understanding of the way television audiences saw the relationships between the characters, and the adjustment of the plot to public expectations. The women consulted proposed solutions to ensure justice:

> In the end, Adma must be punished, because evil can’t win. She could be arrested by the police or end up mad, or maybe poor and without the husband she loves so much.
> Or my favorite suggestion: she could poison herself! (Excerpt from the São Paulo discussion-group report sent to the scriptwriters).

The scriptwriters followed the public’s suggestions: firstly, the mayor cheats on his wife, then leaves her when the ghost of the subprefect whom she had murdered drives her to confess to her crimes. Finally, she dies a horrible and painful death, poisoned by the henchman who helped her to kill. He commits suicide at her side.

Some script transformations can be radical. Silvio de Abreu’s novela, *Torre de Babel,* is one example of the negotiation between the didactic ambitions of an author and the audience constraints imposed on him or her by the channel.

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Faced with the problem of drug addiction that affects all strata of society, with the growing number of attacks in major Brazilian urban centers, and repeated crimes against homosexuals in the country, Silvio de Abreu proposed a telenovela about urban violence to TV Globo, in order to “make the public think.” He wanted to give viewers a “punch in the stomach” by giving them an “x-ray of modern times.” In order to do so, he used characters marginalized by Brazilian society as his protagonists in Torre de Babel. In the first episodes, de Abreu showered the audience with violent actions and characters. An old alcoholic man rules over a tense atmosphere in the junkyard where his family lives. The youngest son of a bourgeois family is a drug user, thus bringing violence into an environment normally sheltered from the aggression of the streets. The homosexual couple have a perfect loving relationship and live in the heart of São Paulo’s upper bourgeois society. Finally, Tony Ramos, an actor who normally plays good, honest men, beats his wife to death with a shovel in the very first episode. Dimly lit sets without even a hint of “glamor” and the original soundtrack of Torre de Babel created a climate of fear.

After audience figures plummeted, and the series received virulent criticism from the archbishop of Rio, the producers were forced to change the series fast. Initially, the radical solution was to get rid of the “problem” characters. Janete Clair, writer of successful telenovelas since the mid-1960s, told me that in one novela, to make a new start, an earthquake was agreed upon as the ideal solution. Similarly, Silvio de Abreu decided to blow up the shopping center earlier than intended, in order to relaunch the plot. The character of the young drug addict dies of an overdose shortly before the explosion, and the homosexual couple disappears at the same time as the grandfather whom the public deemed excessively violent.

The directors switched to more “glamorous” settings: the junkyard became a fashionable bar, and the poor, violent junkyard became a colorful working-class neighborhood. These were the most visible transformations of the novela.

Throughout the broadcasting of Torre de Babel, the scriptwriter also strove to rehabilitate the main character who kills his wife in the first episode, by placing him back into more traditional, good-man roles. In Brazil at the time, there was a law to protect men “whose honor had been threatened;” the character’s case could therefore be legally defended. Even so, the scriptwriter began trying to rehabilitate him. The novela therefore repeatedly showed the hero’s sufferings, laboriously proving his “innocence” according to the argument that any man humiliated by his adulterous wife would have done the same. He is only totally redeemed after much suffering and a series of injustices. He is rehabilitated through the exaltation of family values, which is always a key component in these melodramas. The rationale of Judeo-Christian morality clearly dominates the resolution of conflicts.

The time of the novela allows order to be restored and the world to be reorganized according to each individual’s personal merit. In the final episodes, the characters considered worthy of a place in society are rewarded, most often by a
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Marriage, whereas those who have displeased are punished, sometimes by a violent death. The formula of a rise to royalty seen in fairytales is replaced by a social rise to the ranks of the upper bourgeoisie. Social ascension becomes the supreme reward for poor but good characters.

In the case of a monologic work, Mikhail Bakhtin speaks of “the author’s ‘surplus’ field of vision” (Bakhtin 1984, 70); at the start of a novela, the scriptwriters have a “limited field of vision.” They wait to see the script played out on screen and to read audience reactions in the press in order to decide where the plot will go:

Thus the freedom of a character is an aspect of the author’s design. A character’s discourse is created by the author, but created in such a way that it can develop to the full its inner logic and independence as someone else’s discourse, the word of the character himself (Bakhtin 1984, 65).

With the concept of polyphony, Bakhtin put forward the idea of multiple voices participating in the construction of characters. Based on debates published by the press and reports from viewer surveys, the scriptwriters adapt and transform the scenario. During this collective process of creation, the characters acquire a certain autonomy, revealing their own mind, which is independent from the author’s voice. The scriptwriters speak of knowing a character and their way of speaking and reasoning:

To begin with, everyone writes for specific characters … , but after a few weeks, everyone can write for any character. We know them, we know how they talk, how they react (Glória Barreto, dialogue scriptwriter, 2001).

The idea of a consensus grows stronger towards the end of the novela. The logic of conflict resolution takes over, as if external to the scriptwriter’s decisions.

What Anthropological Reflection Emerges from Fiction?

As evidenced above, my interviews with scriptwriters revealed an Aristotelian view of fiction. The scriptwriters see themselves as social agitators, but also as change mediators. The analysis of the internal logic shows an eroticization of social conflicts that are transformed into family conflicts. Meanwhile, the analysis of writing processes shows that the dramatization of the events in the longer time of serials offers a space for public debate. The scriptwriters create a liminal situation involving the redefinition of the social norms of an imaginary Brazil, as emphasized by Victor Turner:

If liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs (Turner 1969, 167).

Television viewers form a true court of public opinion, while social actors attempt to influence the evolution of the representations. The controversies impact the lives and sometimes even lead to the deaths of certain characters. The fictional
condemnation becomes a real social condemnation. Telenovelas are thus a privileged space for observing social relationships and cultural change.

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Turner, Victor W.
Élodie Perreau, Telenovelas and Social Debate: Fiction as a Public Space of Discussion in Brazil. — The broadcasting of telenovelas, TV serials that run six days a week for eight months, has set off nationwide discussions in Brazil. Since the military dictatorship (1964–1985), scriptwriters have moved far beyond the dismissal of television as merely a form of entertainment. The process of creating a telenovela is analyzed by closely describing the work of script writing countrywide. By dramatizing everyday life, scriptwriters create an original public space for discussions where Brazilians judge the characters in what we might call a court of public opinion. During these discussions in the course of script writing, “social actors” ask viewers to think about the issues involved in dramatization. Scriptwriters use ensuing controversies to rework their scripts.

Élodie Perreau, Telenovelas et débats sociaux : la fiction comme espace public de discussion au Brésil. — La diffusion des telenovelas, feuilletons télévisés programmés six jours sur sept, pendant huit mois, provoque des discussions d’ampleur nationale au Brésil. Depuis la dictature militaire (1964-1985), les scénaristes ont dépassé les critiques de la télévision comme divertissement assimilé à une sous-culture. L’auteur s’attache à analyser le processus de création d’une telenovela, en détaillant le travail d’écriture des scénarios à l’échelle du pays. En dramatisant le quotidien, les scénaristes créent un espace public original de discussions dans lequel les Brésiliens jugent les personnages constituant un véritable tribunal populaire. Au cours des débats qui accompagnent l’écriture, les acteurs sociaux appellent les spectateurs à réfléchir aux enjeux de la représentation. À partir des polémiques, les scénaristes transforment le scénario.