Repetition, serialization, popular narrative and melodrama

Daniela Zanetti[1]

ABSTRACT

This article presents some concepts to comprehend the process of repetition and serialization in nowadays fictional audiovisual productions, emphasizing how certains aspects of the aesthetics of the melodrama and of the popular romance contribute to this logic of "innovation on repetition".

Key words: repetition, serialization, fiction

Introduction

The proposal of this article is to bring togheter some reflections around the contemporary audiovisual productions, focusing in how the concepts of the repetition and serialization (serialized narratives), articulated with the aesthetic of the popular narratives and melodrama. This area of production includes, therefore, fictional and serial productions, as soap operas, series and short series, and also cinematograpich productions, if we take in account the phenomenon of "trilogies" and remakes (frequent in the cinematographic industry) and the intertextuality between the works.

We investigate the concepts of repetition and serialization and the more outstanding aspects of the popular romance and of the melodrama analysing the predominance and the permanence (almost untouchable) of these resources and poetics in the field of the current television production (and also cinematographic one). We want to expose recurrent aspects that serve as parameter for a possible internal analysis of audiovisuais works based on the concept of "innovation through the repetition" and that make possible the understanding of how functions the fictional works that, for its marketing force in the cultural industry, they involve our daily life and are products of strong symbolic power. In general, these are the products that contribute for the construction of strong referencies of our imaginary.

These audiovisual products, therefore, come from a field of symbolic production (Bourdieu, 1996) that it is associated with mainstream: the biggest television and media corporations that make massive investments in the production of serial works, the entertainment and cinema industries, etc, that need constantly release innovative products (a kind of product that always needs to be identified as unseen) and, at the same time, to keep and to create new audiences. For in such, scriptwriters, directors, producers and other professionals of this field of artistic and industrial production, in articulation with TV channels and cinema studios, use strategies that directly affect the internal dimension of the developed products. In this sense, there is a external configuration that affects the internal dimension of the works.

To support this premise, we are based on the theory of the fields of Bourdieu, that can be applied at contemporary cultural and artistic phenomenon. According to this author, there are three operations necessary to investigate the field of cultural production: a) the analysis of the position of the field (televisive, cinematographic, literary, etc.) in the center of the field of the power and its evolution throughout the time; b) the analysis of the internal structure of the field, universe that obeys its proper

[1] Daniela Zanetti is attending the doctorate course of Contemporary Communication and Culture at Federal University of Bahia. She is Master in Letters at Mackenzie University and graduated in Social Communication/Journalism at Federal University of Espirito Santo. Currently she develops research about audiovisual culture and participates of the research group A-Tevê - Laboratory of Analysis of Telefiction. daniela.zanetti@gmail.com

laws of functioning and transformation, that is, the structure of the relations between the ocuupied positions by the individuals and competing groups that search its legitimacy; and c) the analysis of the genesis of the habitus of the occupants to these positions, that is, the system of disposals, that are products of a social trajectory and a position inside the field (Bourdieu, 1996:243). These diverse instances of analysis result in an comprehension of the field as a whole, including agents and institutions. According to Souza (2003: 60), "the use of the field notion means to consider the processes of production, reproduction, distribution and consume of the products and practices associated to it. However, we will concentrate only in some aspects of the field concept.

While basic concept to understand how the processes occur in which are inserted the products in analysis, field is understood here as "the space of the relations of force between agents or institutions that have in common to possess the capital necessary to occupy dominant positions in the different fields" (Bourdieu, 1996:244). It is the place of the shock of forces between those who possess specific types of capital (cultural, economical), resulting in struggles that occur in the symbolic dimensios.

Appealing to the first operation suggested for Bourdieu, the field mentioned here refers to the universe of the production of audiovisual works, more specifically those directed to the exhibition on TV. As any other "industry", the television also is conducted by the logic of the market and, therefore, by the profit. It prevails the necessity of reaching ratings and satisfaction of the public, that is, some type of "symbolic profit", and that almost always also generates real profits. For each analyzed product, therefore, it is essential to investigate which are the responsible producers or channels for its creation, development and exhibition; the positioning of the TV channel (or other media corporation) in the local or world-wide market, and its relation with others competing companies; the positioning of the product in the programming grating and in comparison with other similar programs in other media; the producers involved in the creation and "maintenance" of the product on air (scriptwriters, directors, producers, main actors, etc.). It is important still to locate the product in its instances of recognition: how it was evaluated by its proper idealizers, received by the public (audience and awardings) and evaluated by the specialized critics. The answers to these questions will compose the external dimension of the audiovisual productions.

To follow, some basic concepts will be presented to understand some relative aspects related to the internal dimension of the products, related to the repetition processes and serialization that characterizes the artistic contemporary production on media while an entertainment product. After that, will be discussed the aesthetic and narrative choices of the popular romances and melodramas, since these sorts of s are, in some way, usual in diverse audiovisual contemporary productions. The soap operas seem more to stand out these models. However, the ideal of the "romantic love" and certain strategies of construction of the hero, for example, have its origins in these s and also are strongly represented in North American TV series, comedies and romantic dramas produced by Hollywood.

Serial production (and innovation)

Many TV fictional productions follow the dynamics of the repetition and of the serialization, aspects that make possible the continuity of certain products – through chapters, episodes and seasons – and the development of new products, even those not serial. About the demands of the cultural market, the originality and the innovation, always so demanded, will be inserted in the serialization processes, resulting in what Calabrese (1987) calls "aesthetic of repetition". This dynamics is present in the soap operas produced in Latin America and also in North America and England, in series and short series (called "minisséries" in Brazil). The series produced in USA stand out perhaps for its penetration in several countries.

Thus, let's take the repetition concept that concerns to the structure of the product. Acording to Calabrese (1987), the repetitions, in the case of fictional narratives, are not only the continuations of the

adventures, actions and dramas of the characters, but also the used resources, as the subjects and the atmosphere created by the sceneries. One of the parameters related to the repetition concept concerns to what is possible to be perceived as identical and to what is possible to be perceived as different: in the first case, there are works that are created from a prototype, but result in subsequent variations; in the second case, there are the products that appear like originals, producing, nevertheless, identical material. A second parameter consists in the way of tying the discontinuity of the narrative time with the story time. The continuity concerns to the chainings that make possible the serialization of the material and also concerns to the narrative time. One third parameter concerns to the dimension in which occur the repetitions and the differentiations, focus in the fact that it is in the discursive level that the variations take place. According to Fiorin (2002), the discursive structures vary syntactically (discursive forms, time and space, etc.) and also semantically (themes and figures). The basic level, on the other hand, is what normally provides the repetition structures.

About the process of repetition as structural mechanism to standardize texts, Calabrese (1987:57) brings out three basic aspects of the repetition aesthetic: i) the organized variation (multiple variations of figures, icons and themes locked up in a specific structure), the polycentrism (several dramatic moments in the same plot, for example) and the regulated irregularity (that makes possible the rhythm of the narratives). This is because of the necessities of the entertainment industry, that must to produce a great amount of new products, most of the time appealing to the "copy" of what already exists, however coated in new features. To explanin this, Calabrese compare it to the process of automobiles production:

> It is enough to think about the new formulas of production of the automobiles: a low number of structural invariantes, called a "base model", a high number of figurative invariantes, a very high number of regulated variables, and, finally, a large number of the so called "optionals", the small details that give personality to the automobiles (Calabrese, 1987:59).

From a "base model", a prototype, are created different ways of repetition, be in the thematic way, in the iconic or in the narrative one.

Kothe (1994) calls "trivial" the narratives that resulting from this logic of repetition and that prevail nowadays in the televisiosn fictional productions what, according to him, are superficial and too simple. Referring to the formulas of combination between variants and invariantes, Kothe affirms that there is a disguise "through the diversification of surface structures" (Kothe, 1994:20), what would please the massive public immensely.

However, from another point of view, this "aesthetics of repetition" should not be considered "poor", since its value is exactly providing to the public (and to the market) a vast combination of thematic and narrative variables that make products differents between itself. Its value is just the composition of possible arrangements.

Eco (1989) emphasizes that the processes of serialization were always present in the tradition of the artistic production and that, in face of the massive contemporary productions for cinema and television, it is necessary to be aware to a type of work that, at first sight, is not similar to any other thing. Proposing a classification for the differente types of conjugation between the repetition and the newness, the schematism and the innovation, Eco presents several definitions for certain fictional products. One of them is the *retaken*, which is the retaking or the continuation of a successful subject. On the basis of this structure, we have well-succeeded trilogies and cinema series, as *Star Wars*, *Back to the future*, *X-Men*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Matrix*, *Spider-Man*, *Harry Potter*, among others. There is also the *tracing*, that is a successful model that is reformulated or appropriated, being or not announced to the audience. The product with "assumed" traces exposed to the public are called *remakes*. The *series* are made to last more: weeks, months and even years, and are divided in chapters, episodes and seasons. They have a permanent narrative project and a certain number of main and secondary characters. It has innumerable examples,

but we can quote since old series like *Dallas*, from the 80's, until the current ones *24 Hours*, *House*, *Desperate Housewifes* and *Lost,* just to mention some North American productions. Although each episode of this type of product can be watched separately (in other words, each chapter has a beginning and na end), the stories work from a combination of differents plot points and turning points that occur to the same group of characters. In accordance with Eco, *saga* can be understood as a variation of the *series*. It presents a succession of events (apparently unknown) linked to the "historical" process of one or more characters, emphasizing the idea of time passage. *A casa das sete mulheres*, short serie of 52 chapters shown by Rede Globo in 2003, has this characteristic of *saga*, as it has an epic tone and emphasizes the time passage of the characters in one determined place. However, it is important to stand out that these classifications are not rigid and normally they appear conjugated.

Talking specially about productions based on serial narratives (as the *series*), Eco affirms that:

> In the series, the reader believes that he enjoys the newness of the story while he, in fact, is distracted following a constant narrative scheme and is satisfied when he finds a known character, with his tics, his set phrases, his techniques to solve problems... (Eco, 1989:123).

The return to the "identical", therefore, is a basic aspect in the process of production – and also of enjoyment – of a serial production, which turns in a sort of consolation, since the viewer feels comfortably while finding what is already known, and while having the knowledge about how the narrative will be more or less driven and how the conflicts will be solved. This is also a form of maintaining the commitment and the loyalty of the viewer to the product.

Machado (2000) suggests to group these productions called *series* in three big categories: "those based on the variations around a thematic topic, those based on the metamorphosis of the narrative elements and those structured in the form of an interlacing of different situations" (Machado, 2000:90). In the first case, are the serial narratives that "try to extract the maximum of the combinations between variants and invariantes along the process of repetition" (Machado, 2000:90). There are variations around a central subject and normally they adopt the structure of single episodes. In this type can be fitted the series of the Rede Globo *A grande família*, *A diarista* and *Sob nova direção*. In the second way, there is a great variability of the iconographic, thematic and narrative combinations, that are suffering continuous redefinitions along the series. The episodes are more or less independent of each other, but they can make possible a continuity in some dramatic situations. An example of this model is the Brazilian series called *Armação Ilimitada*, produced and shown by Rede Globo between 1985 and 1988, and directed by Guel Arraes. The third model of serialization consists in "building an interlacing of a large number of parallel or divergent situations, producing as result a complex net of events not necessarily integrated" (Machado, 2000:94). In this category can be included the recent and successful North American series *Lost* and *Heroes*.

It is noticed that the presented definitions and classifications concern to the possibility of combinations of variants and invariantes (thematic, iconographic and narratives). This organizational aspect also takes place in the constructions of the so called popular romances and in the sort of melodrama, serialized or not.

The popular romance and the melodrama

Many of the characteristics that nowadays we see in serial narratives have their roots in the so called popular romances, what was created and settled in France in the 1830s. It represents the appearance of a kind of narrative for the bourgeoisie, influenced by the fact that the women also begins to consume this type of "goods" derived from the popular romance. It is the birth of a new public, for which the popular narrative speaks and that is also the main character of this narrative. The people from the middle and the lower classes start to became the object of these narratives.

According to Eco (1991), the history of the popular romance is now divided in three periods: a) First period or heroic-romantic, what has beginning in the 30's of the 19th century, in parallel to the development of the serial publications, to the birth of a new public of readers, petit bourgeois and also industrial workers and craftsman. They are more populist and "democratic" romances; b) Second period or bourgeoisie, which appears in the last decades of the 19th century and belongs to the age of Imperialism. It is a kind of a reactionary romance, "petit bourgeois", sometimes racist and anti-semitic, without no commitment to social investigation. The main character is no more the avenging hero of the oppressed people, but the ordinary man, the innocent one who triumphs on his enemies after long tribulations; c) Third period or neo-heroic, that starts in the begining of the 1900s. In this type of romance, the antisocial heroes appear, unusual characters that do not avenge the oppressed people, but they try to carry out their selfish plan of power.

Although the metamorphoses for which it passes the popular romance along the time, it is still possible to enumerate its main characteristics, today present in several types of fictional narratives from the media. One of most recurrent is the counterposition between good and the bad. The universe in which happens the story is normally maniqueíst, submitted to two opposing actions of the good and the evil, which also allows the elaboration of the plot. The society, always disturbed, appears initially in balance: in one side, there are those who suffer, the innocent ones, victims and at the same time protected, with no active participation in the fight, since this belongs to the heroes and protagonists. Against the opressed group and the innocent ones, there is the group of the rulers, that can be good or bad, since they, the rulers, use the same resources and justifications to the fight, like antisocial methods, "stroke after stroke", "the aims justifies the means", "the justice must win despite the use of force", etc. It is the ruler that transfoms themselves in justice, and it is not the justice as laws of the society that determines the movements of the ruler. Armed, the rulers (from the good side and from the bad side) constitute pairs of mortal enemies and the fight between them happens over the people that they pursue or protect. (Eco, 1991).

It is in this scenary of fight that the figure of the hero, normally the protagonist, stands out in the plot. The charismatic hero is chaste and immune to the desire, not consumed by any passion, and he does not even belong to any woman. These characteristics quoted by Eco are associated to the first "prototypes" of heroes of the mass culture, especially in the cartoons, which most tipical character is the Superman. These traces of the hero's character, however, are modified along the time, giving place to the figure of a central, heroic and courageous character who is at the same time beautiful and conqueror, playing often in the main romantic composition of the story. The "weak ones" (or loosers?) serve to introduce in the popular romance an aspect of humanity, since they not have the emblematic rigidity of other characters. The figure of the hero as superman appears in the populist and democratic romance, adopting an authoritarian solution (paternalist, self-guaranteed and self-suported) for the contradictions of the society, acting over the head of its passive members. The heroes decide by themselves what it is good for the oppressed people and how they must be avenged; the superman never questions about the possibility of the people make decisions by themselves, therefore he never consults their opinion.

The constant narrative curve of the popular romance bursts crises and contradictions. Then, with the apparition of a god *ex-machina* (a "rescuer" come of beyond), the contradictions are solved and the order returns. The narrative structure demands that the universe presents imperfections, but that these imperfections can be solved by a reformative action. Eco (1991) enphasize the fact that these structures do not allow the popular romance be revolutionary because, otherwise, the narrative model would not be supported.

Through this analyse perspective of the audiovisual fictional products, it is possible to realize how much the social and historical context interferes in the formation of a narrative genre and how it is able to comprise the totality of a determined vision of the world, reproducing it *ad infinitum*. A deep structure in which keeps certain social logic ideologically well marked remains in the way of telling stories and

producing narratives. This reproduction is possible thanks to the artifices generated by the combination betwenn repetition and innovation, therefore, as Eco affirms, the popular romance already begins as an instrument of mass entertainment. According to him:

> The popular romance does not invent original narrative situations, but ir combines a repertoire of "topical" situations already recognizable, accepted, loved by its audience (...). The readers, on their side, ask to the popular romance (that is an instrument of amusement and escape) not to propose them new formal experiences or dramatic and problematic subversions of the systems of values in force, but exactly the opposite: that reinforces the systems of expectation in the culture in force and in agreement with them. (Eco, 1991:81).

It is clear that, more and more, the viewer demands new aesthetic experiences, very usually provided by technological resources used in the development of special effects. However, the affirmation of the author enphasize the repetition of formulas and narrative strategies, being possible, thus, to affirm that certain parameters of the popular romance contribute to the conformation of the aesthetic of the repetition, despite the newness in the formal aspect.

The same can be perceived in the melodrama, theatrical genre related to the universe of the popular romance. The melodrama is constantly present in the modern fictional products, being popularized and expanded both in the television and in the cinema, although consideraded with less value if it is compared with other genres. According to Xavier (2003), the melodrama combines sentimentality and visual pleasure, "found new vitreous-metallic shades without losing its basic trace, showing its suitability to the demands of a market culture that always desires the incorporation of the new in the repetition" (2003:89). Therefore, a "return" to the origins of its genre undertaken here is an attempt to capture the basis of their mechanisms and effect strategies on the audience, to identify them in the current television productions.

Created as theatrical genre in France, in the end of the 18th century, the melodrama starts to stablish a relation with the romances of the *folhetim*[2] from the second generation of authors. The majority of the melodramatists also were writers of romances and the great amount of romances was adapted to the theater. The repetition in melodrama fall back on some "technical conventions", on which it is possible to create variations. Concerning the thematic, stands out the persecution (as pivot of the intrigue) and the recognition (as strategy of "closing" of the plot). According to Thomasseau, this "obsessive" thematic bipolarity of the persecution and the recognition gives to the melodrama its proper dynamics: "the persecution keeps the suspense; the recognition abruptly removes it and the more quickly it happens more pathetic the situation is" (Thomasseau, 2005:37). Concerns to the characters, there will be always a villain, the "pursued innocence", a comic character, the noble father, etc, however always keeping a maniqueist distribution of the characters. In this direction, one affirms that the characters of the melodrama are "masks of behaviors and languages strongly codified and immediately recognizable" (Thomasseau, 2005). The traces of the personality of the characters, if they possess good or bad intentions, are created and presented in a schematical way. It is adopted, therefore, emblematic types, but they are extended and receive new traces of personality acoording to the evolution of this genre. In this process, are also incorporated characters that reflect the new social actors who emerge from the social and political transformations that occurred in France during the 19th century.

The melodrama kept its trajectory in the cinema, expanding itself later for the context of the fictional television products. Still according Thomasseau,

> The cinema, with effect, from his first movies retake the great successes of the genre and some authors of melodramas (...) they also have wrote screenplays. We meet again, so, the extensions of the melodramatic aesthetics in the movies of espionage, of cape and sword and especially in the westerns that retake for themselves the effects, the stereotypes and the typology of the genre. And the television repeats often some of its great classics. (Thomasseau, 2005:136).

---

[2] The *folhetim* is a kind of serial edition of literary works (fiction, romance, etc) published in newspapers and magazines.

Those "great classics" would appear again on TV trought mainly the incorporation of its canons, that actually are present in *soap operas* and serial producions of this type. Analysing products of the mass culture (series, films, cartoons), Eco stands out the way of reapropriation of those melodrama canons (and from the popular romance), and that can be verifyied in the composition of the plot and of the characters from the many contemporaneous television and cinema products.

As says Xavier (2003), this hability of articulate sentimentalism with visual resources has been guaranteed to the melodrama two centuries of hegemony in the shows and entertainment market. Since its beginning, this genre has suffered transformations, combining new influencies and adapting itself to the social changes. But in general it combines a determinated number of elements wiht a formule that simplify the world and reduce the contradicitons of the human being to a moral polarity, in which set up the struggle between the tiranics ones and the ones that suffer injutices, being these those who triumph in the end. In the other hand, this genre has the power of schocking the audience, the power of provoke tears or of provoke on them hate of a certain character. The essencial, therefore, is more based on the capture strategies of the audiences adopted by the melodrama. In this way, the melodrama keeps its strategies of "dialogue" with the audience giving more importance to the emotion and to the sensation, and varying these emotions from an alternation of the pacific and turbulent moments, happy and pathetic ones. Other aspect of this genre – also well explained by Thomasseau – reinforces this tendency: "The intrigue of a melodrama is never well written, but is always well described" (2005:136). It is not by chance that, initially, the melodrama was used to name the theatrical plays that were not following the classic criteria and that, especially, use the music as the contribution for the dramatic effects.

The melodrama, therefore, does not take the loving plot as the only element in the story, but it offers subsidies to bring it out trought the devices of emphasis on the sentimentalism and of the emotionalism. Finding in sentimental Sarlo (1985) elements of which she calls sentimental literature (specifically related to the narratives of periodic circulation in Argentina between 1917 and 1827), we can quote some familiar aspects of the television productions which we are talking about. One of them is the primacy of love and passion. These can be genuine and "healthy" or not legitimate and "sick", depending on the kind of the loving conjunctions that are established. The social obstacles – in the economic sphere (lovers that belongs to the differents social classes), or in the moral dimension (one of the lovers is married) – often represent strong obstructions and work as dramatic elements. Other important aspect is the happiness ideal as narrative engine, although all narratives, in a way, have a kind of happiness as objective. To conquer that, it is necessary to overcome many obstacles in the plot, what creates some moments of confrontation, what contributes to outlining an especific kind of writing. But in this kind of romance the happiness ideal is togheter with the search of love, what leads to the "empire of the feelings", organized acoording to the order of the desires, the society and the moral.

These canonical forms again take us to the necessary mechanisms for the development of innovations from conventions in the way that the plots and the characters are structured, making possible many ways of repetition and serialization, and, at the same time, strategies that guarantee the involvement and the loyalty of the viewer.

The popular romance and the narratives of the melodrama, then, use diverse resources to produce more sensorial and emotional effects on the public, setting aside the effects of sense (signification). How does it happen?

Many authors and methods of analysis offer keys to understand how the fictional products act on the audience, but as the aim of this articule does not concern it, we will only present a short reflection about it.

As sasys Gomes (2004), the producer of a cinematographic work (and television, for extension) disposes of several resources, strategies and programs to provoke specific effects on the audience. Those can be of

cognitive, sensorial and affective order. There are resources and materials organized and arranged to produce appreciation effects. The strategies are these elements structured, composed and articulated as devices, with the objective of create specific effects. The effects are the result of the articulation of the ways and strategies on the appreciation, which emerge from the final product (Gomes, 2004).

This "place of the appreciation" of a product suposes the combination of the resources and strategies, resulting in effects that generate some feelings, senses and sensations. The aesthetic composition (effects of light, color and sound, framings, movements of camera, etc.) thus would produce sensorial effects. The communication composition produces senses, meanings, able to transmit some type of message. It is related to cognitive factors and induces to the reflection on something. The poetic composition generates emotional effects in the viewer; it produces a especific state of mind, of spirit. Sensation, feeling and sense then compose the nature of the effects produced by a movie (as well as any other product of artistic expression).

In this way, if we take as an example a scene (of a soap opera or of a movie) in which two characters make choking and intimate declarations (and, so, decisive), it is quite probable that, for the melodramatic molds, will be used a closer framing (very often with alternation of plans and counterplans) focusing in the expressions and in the proximity of the characters, with an artificial light in the background, accompanied by an appropriate music that will sharpen the sentimental and emotional tone of the moment. The weeping eyes will be almost a demand. Melodramatic "classic" scenes as those in which, for example, a father dies in the arms of the son, telling confidences (a pathetic event, connected to the catastrophe, in accordance with the Poetics of Aristóteles); the lovers hold each other at the moment of the reunion oro f the separation; a family secret is revealed between two relatives. All these moments demand a special treatment that generally tend to take the viewer to the emotional involvement, to create some kind of identification with the characters.

Conclusion

The reflections undertaken here about the concepts of serialization, repetition, melodrama and popular romance, situated in a especific field of symbolic production, is taken as a beginning for a deeper investigation, or even as complement for other kind of analysis of audiovisual fictional products. The aspects quoted in the article can appear in the internal dimension of the same product (the narrative resources that allow to give the continuity of the serie, for exemplo), and also in the comparison among two or more differentiated products (the same deep structure that is used in the romantic comedies, for example). These kind of mechanisms allow the serialization of a product, being in an explicit or implicit form. The repetition of the dramatic resources in the same work, with few variations in the level of the discourse, allows the continuity of the narrative along several chapters and episodes.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that Thomasseau (2005) demonstrates how the discourses have changed along the time and how the fictional elements on the stage accompanied this process. The same kind of work is made by Sarlo (1985), who analyses a more punctual phenomenon.

These invetigations bring important contributions to make relations between the external and internal dimensions of the nowadays media massive product. The analysis of the surface structures of the contemporary audiovisual fictional products can make emerge valuable aspects related to the social, historical and cultural context in which they were produced (and to its most limited field of production), revealing predominant perspectives and other in the process of transition.