

# Towards a transnational approach to Latin American television: Journeys, borders, and centers and peripheries

## *Rumo a uma abordagem transnacional da televisão latino-americana: Trajetórias, fronteiras e centros e periferias*

■ NAHUEL RIBKE<sup>a</sup>

The Open University of Israel, Department of Literature, Language and Arts. Raanana, Israel

### ABSTRACT

The present paper proposes a historical transnational approach with the aim of grasping the main patterns and challenges in the production and consumption of television contents in the region. Instead of focusing on national cases, as most studies on the field do, I would like to focus here on the transnational circulation of Latin American television through the journeys and passages of producers, entrepreneurs, contents, and technologies across the region from the 1950s to the present. The resulting remapping of Latin American television prompts us to consider the linguistic and cultural obstacles and barriers affecting the circulation of television contents produced in the region as well as the established power asymmetries and hierarchies among Latin American countries.

**Keywords:** Transnational television, Latin American history, fragmented unity, streaming platforms, multiple centers and peripheries

### RESUMO

O presente artigo propõe uma abordagem transnacional histórica com o objetivo de compreender os principais padrões e desafios na produção e consumo de conteúdos televisivos na região latino-americana. Em vez de focar em casos nacionais, como fazem a maioria dos estudos sobre o campo, gostaria de destacar aqui a circulação transnacional da televisão latino-americana por meio das trajetórias e passagens de produtores, empreendedores, conteúdos e tecnologias em toda a região, dos anos 1950 até os dias atuais. O resultante remapeamento da televisão latino-americana nos leva a considerar que os obstáculos e barreiras linguísticas e culturais afetam a circulação de conteúdos televisivos produzidos na região, bem como as consagradas assimetrias e hierarquias de poder entre os países da região.

**Palavras-chave:** Televisão transnacional, história latino-americana, unidade fragmentada, plataformas de streaming, centros e periferias múltiplos

<sup>a</sup> Assistant Professor at the Open University of Israel. His research interests cover institutional and cultural processes through Latin American mass media, celebrity politics and mass media history. In 2020, he published the book *Transnational Latin American television: Genres, formats and adaptations* (Routledge).  
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9540-0338>.  
E-mail: [nahuerib@gmail.com](mailto:nahuerib@gmail.com)

REVISITING QUESTIONS ABOUT the defining traits of Latin American television at a time when the stability of technological, geo-cultural, and economic borders is undergoing radical transformations may not seem at first sight to be the most suitable approach for understanding the present media landscape in the region. While the intersection of worldwide economic, cultural, and political processes has contributed to the erosion of national and regional identities, technological changes in the production and consumption of audio-visual contents have disrupted the boundaries of well-established cultural practices. Not only viewers, but also, we, scholars, may find ourselves uncomfortable when asked how we define what television or cinema are, today. Despite the challenges that this conjuncture poses for making solid theoretical claims, I would like to argue in this paper that revisiting the history of television in Latin America can provide us with some tools for grasping the main patterns and challenges in the production and consumption of television content in this region. Instead of focusing on national cases, as most studies on the field do, I would like to focus here on the transnational circulation of Latin American television through the journeys and passages of producers, entrepreneurs, contents, and technologies across the region from the 1950s to the present. To that end, I propose in this paper to weave together the micro-histories of pioneering TV producers, technicians, and creators with the political and economic history of the region and the world since the second half of the twentieth century.

### **ON THE VOYAGES OF ENTREPRENEURS, TECHNOLOGIES, AND CONTENT PRODUCERS**

Instead of framing the present audiovisual consumption via cable TV and streaming platforms as a break with the past, I would like to argue here that several defining features that characterize the new entertainment media ecosystem were already present from the beginnings of television in the region. Let's begin our story with the voyages of pioneering media entrepreneurs to import television technology and know-how from the United States. Several national histories of television emphasize the far-sighted vision of local entrepreneurs and investors, the creativity of radio managers and artists who moved to television, and how the self-taught technicians learned their trade on the move. However, the international and transnational contexts of the transplantation of television to the region remain on the margins of that narrative. Critical scholars writing during the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the interventionist aspects of such transplantation; however, it should be noted that their critique

was framed within a more general and all-encompassing argument about how Latin America's modernization process was unfolding within a capitalist system (Beltrán & Fox, 1980; Mattelart, 1973; Melo, 1987). Despite its convincing claims, this critique of media imperialism did not address the contradictory and complex nature of the media landscape in the region. Presenting a dichotomic narrative about the impact of the U.S. on the Latin American mediascape was a very effective pedagogical political tool, but it fostered the neglect of shifting power imbalances between centers and peripheries within and outside the region.

Recovering a micro-history of the arrival of television to Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina in the early 1950s may give us fuller perspective on the internal dynamics involving the television industry within the region. Those dynamics created a Latin American media system that is also, but not exclusively, shaped by its asymmetrical relationship with the United States. Encouraged by the local political establishment and embracing an overtly nationalistic rhetoric, regional entrepreneurs embarked on a region-wide competition to be the first to bring television and modernity to their nations (Castro, 2000, p. 20; González de Bustamante, 2012, pp. 1-26; Sinclair, 1998, p. 14; Varela, 2005, pp. 13-44). Numerous questions were raised by the popular press during the 1950s, such as "which Latin American country would be the first to launch TV broadcasting?" "what does the fact that we were left behind in the race for national television broadcasting say about us?" The regional competition among Latin American entrepreneurs went against the advice of U.S. corporation managers, who were reluctant about the prospects of importing such an expensive media system to nations with small consumer markets (Machado de Assis, 2000, p. 20).

Returning to the main inquiry about how a transnational approach can help us understand the region's current media, cultural, and political landscape, we should ask what we can learn from this embryonic story? While it is undeniable that contemporary media technologies have disrupted the patterns of audiovisual production and distribution in the region, I would like to argue that the arrival of Netflix to the region, presents us with similar attitudes and approaches to those mentioned earlier. Netflix is an online streaming service based in the U.S. that arrived at Latin America in 2011, at a very early stage of its global expansion. Just as U.S. television managers had done in the 1950s, at the beginning of the second decade of the second millennium, experts warned about the lack of proper internet infrastructure in Latin American countries and the fact that a large number of households in the region lacked access to a broadband connection (Cornelio-Marí, 2020, pp. 1-17; Fraga, 2011; Muñoz, 2011). Much like television half a century earlier, Netflix was seen as a proof of modernity and development which was, and perhaps still is, measured through

quantified metrics such as the number of subscribers per country, the number of original productions per country made available by global streaming platforms and the reach and the quality of broadband services in each country across the region (Andro4ll, 2019; Sanchez, 2019).

While the arrival of the technology and commercial know-how required for television could be explained mainly through the region's political, economic, and cultural links with the U.S, the development of the more distinctive Latin American genres and contents, such as the Telenovela and the Variety Shows genre, should mainly be understood in terms of its internal political, economic, and cultural dynamics. The volatile political and economic situation of the region during the 1960s and 1970s prompted (or forced, if you will) the journey of television producers, creators, and technicians who brought know-how, practices, and ideas that were disseminated across the region. Despite the impact of these movements and circulation (sometimes as exiles) on the development of a local television industry, these are insufficiently researched. Would Latin American television have had the same trajectory without the impact of revolutions, military coups, and economic and political crises that have affected the region ever since the 1950s?

Despite some references in the literature to Latin American television managers and professional who worked in Brazil and Argentina, the story of Cuban diaspora and its role in the development of the local television before and after the Cuban revolution has yet to be written. In Brazil, references to Glória Magadan, the Cuban telenovela writer that worked for Globo during its first years, are often mentioned as a minor anecdote which precludes a deeper analysis about the transplantation of know-how about television production. Looking at this from our present-day awareness of gendered dynamics, we could argue that being a (foreign) woman and working in what was considered as a minor genre probably affected the perception of her role in the adaptation of Cuban soap operas for the Brazilian context. Perhaps the fact that former (male) Brazilian Television producers were and still are involved in the writing of histories and memoirs regarding that period contributed to that omission (Clark & Priolli, 1991, p. 37; "Glória, Ditadora das Novelas", 1969, p. 62; Oliveira, 2011, pp. 138-144). In Argentina, there is a relatively short and scarcely documented biography on Cuban media mogul Goar Mestre (Sirvén, 1996). We still don't know much about the group of technicians and TV professionals who helped in the creation and formation of Buenos Aires-based Canal 13 and whose mark on Argentinean television that endures to this day. The arrival of the Cuban television diaspora to the Southern Cone occurred due to agreements that were more or less open and partnerships between local media owners and broadcasters

and American media concerns that were searching for opportunities to expand their business worldwide (Herz, 1987; Sinclair, 2005). This example may prompt the question of whether it is possible at all to compartmentalize the national, the regional, and the global when analyzing the history of television in the region since its early days.

But beyond the Cuban revolution, we also have clear indications of other crucial movements and travels of television workers that took place as a result of the political and economic turmoil that most of the countries across the region experienced during the last seventy years. This was the case of David Stivel, an Argentine theater and television producer who escaped from Argentina shortly before the 1976 right-wing military coup and led a fruitful career in Colombian television as a director of telenovelas and TV shows (Coronado, 1992, pp. 290-291; Gutierrez, 2007). From the opposite ideological position, Joaquin Blaya, the Chilean media executive who brought Chilean Variety show host Don Francisco to U.S Hispanic television, left Chile in the early 1970s out of fear of the Chilean democratically elected left-wing president Salvador Allende (Kreutzberger, 2001, pp. 17-19; Owens, 1988, p. 1). Despite or because of the current media ecosystem – where media technologies, audiovisual professionals, and contents travel across the globe faster than in previous periods, – Latin American and global politics are likely to continue to have a significant role in the production of television contents across the subcontinent. The transformation of Colombia into a regional center for international film and television productions offers us a contemporary example of how local, national, and regional and international politics alter and shape the region's film and television industries. The rise of Colombia was facilitated by the national government's policies granting incentives toward media industries, but also (and perhaps mainly) by the peace process that began in 2012. Paradoxically, *Narcos* (Brancato et al., 2015-2017), a Netflix's TV series about Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, represents the opportunities that were opened for local producers by the ongoing peace process, and at the same time the transformation of that painful national story into an entertainment fiction series that reinforces stereotypes to attract international audiences (Ribke, 2020b, pp. 103-106).

### **ON THE LINGUISTIC, ECONOMIC, AND HISTORICAL BORDERS OF LATIN AMERICAN TELEVISION SYSTEM**

If in the previous section we have argued for the existence of a Latin American television landscape, we should now inquire about its borders and frontiers. Which countries are included within that system? Which are left behind?

Just as the idea of Latin America as a distinctive cultural and political entity has been bolstered and promoted by the works of intellectuals, writers, and politicians since the nineteenth century, mass media and television function as catalysts in the production of a shared Latin American identity through the transnational circulation of television contents and television personalities across the region. In a moment of extreme euphoria, Chilean TV host Don Francisco declared, that his variety show, broadcasted by U.S Hispanic network Univision and made available by cable networks across the continent, “materialized through the small screen Simón Bolívar’s dream of unifying the American continent” (“Diez Años”, 1996, p. 4). Although some readers may be scandalized by how the host puts on the same level Simón Bolívar and José Martí together with Don Francisco and *El Chavo del Ocho*, I think that we should take seriously the idea that television has played and continues to play a role in the formation of a transnational Latin American identity and of a shared regional popular culture repertoire that exists side by side with the national identities. That transnational Latin American identity is spurred by media producers and advertisers who are interested in creating larger markets for their (mostly foreign) products, but also by audiences across the region who feel interpellated by those popular contents.

Following the flows of contents produced and consumed locally could provide a more accurate map of the region. In this sense, OBITEL’s yearly reports on Ibero-American television fiction offer us significant clues for a transnational study of television in the region because they include contents and audiences that are located beyond the *official* borders of the region such the United States, Spain, and Portugal. But here I want to focus on the internal borders of the Latin American mediascape, because those hidden frontiers may reveal more about the region than its external limits do. In this section I want to reflect on the borders, barriers, and passageways that television contents produced in the region encounter when traveling across the region.

The first thing we should take into account is that some genres typically travel across the region, while other genres and contents remain restricted to the national television sphere. The telenovela genre tends to be regarded as a frequent traveler. Other television contents such as news, comedy shows and current affairs programs target national audiences. Variety shows (“programas de auditório” in Brazil and “programas ómnibus” in Argentina) were, and perhaps still are, an extremely popular Latin American genre almost always omitted from research on television. Despite their often-bizarre aesthetics and controversial hosts, variety show programs across the region were an extremely

effective platform for the creation of a Latin American Popular/Pop music star system and the dissemination of local musical rhythms and genres. Perhaps this omission can be explained by the fact that variety shows weren't exported beyond the region and that they were conceived as low-budget live entertainment to be consumed in the moment. Attitudes towards the values and the social classes represented in those programs may have also contributed to lack of interest on the part of media scholars in the genre (Ribke, 2013).

Despite the frequent characterization of Latin America as a distinctive region with a common language and a shared colonial past, we should be aware that language can constitute an obstacle for the circulation of audiovisual contents in the region. Language barriers can affect the circulation of national television programs across the region, due to conjunctural historical, political, and economic reasons. The region's richest and biggest markets have a vibrant and powerful local media industry that over the years has provided national audiences with local contents, creating viewing habits that discouraged the consumption of foreign contents. According to John Sinclair (1998, p. 16), the status of Mexican Spanish in the region is comparable to that of U.S English in the anglophone geo-linguistic region. While Mexican audiences are resistant toward other Spanish-language productions, Latin American audiences are receptive of Mexican productions because they have been exposed for several decades to Mexican TV shows that circulated across the region. In addition to the size of its market and its powerful economy, Brazil's national language has also functioned as a *natural barrier* to the flow of non-domestic television contents.

But the language barriers that prevented the importing of television contents from the region did not prevent Brazilian telenovelas from becoming huge hits among Latin American audiences. Much like the worldwide impact of the U.S audiovisual industry, Brazilian productions are attractive to audiences in the Spanish-speaking neighboring countries because of their high-budget production values. The scheduling of Brazilian telenovelas on Uruguayan television at the expense of Argentinean productions is an example of the prevalence of production values over cultural proximity. In some cases, countries aspiring to develop their own audiovisual industries may tend to over-emphasize the differences between their own style of Spanish and that of their neighbors' in order to protect their incipient film and television industries. The case of the Argentinean telenovela *Esperanza Mía* (Suar, 2015-2016), produced by Polka and distributed by Dori Media Productions, offer us a thrilling example of how linguistic barriers may be artificially created for economic and/or political

reasons. Chilean broadcasters who bought the Argentinean show decided to dub it into *Chilean Spanish*, in a decision that enraged Chilean viewers who complained about the unnecessary intervention of the local broadcasters and the harmful effects of the dubbing on their viewing experience (“CHV Explica”, 2016). Despite the scarcity of research on this topic, there is some evidence that internal rivalries and competition among Latin American countries may affect the distribution and consumption of audiovisual contents produced in the region. That *internal rivalry* or competition could be induced by present-day market strategies or, for instance, by the long-term political and military history of the region’s ability to shape attitudes and fears among neighboring countries within the region. Chile and Argentina had long-standing border disputes that almost caused a war among the neighboring countries during the late 1970s (Garret, 1985; Villar Gertner, 2014). Do past conflicts and rivalries over geographical borders affect the consumption of intra-regional audiovisual contents and, if so, how? How do international geopolitical alignments of Latin American countries affect the intra-regional circulation and consumption of audiovisual contents?

If *internal rivalry* may present barriers to the internal circulation of regional contents, the common cultural, social, and political traits of Latin American countries are often cited as explanations for the regional consumption patterns of media entertainment contents from outside the region. The case of the *Turkish telenovelas*, the Turkish television drama (dizi) series that have *invaded* Latin American small screens since 2014, are an example of regional audiovisual consumption patterns and cultural trends that are often overlooked. Turkish drama series landed in the region at a relatively later stage, almost a decade after they enjoyed global success. The predominance of Latin American telenovelas across the region and the cultural distance between Latin American countries and Turkey could explain the reluctance of Latin American television managers when offered to purchase Turkish TV series. Patricio Hernandez, the newly arrived CEO of the Chilean Mega Network, who took the reins in the middle of a huge economic and audience crisis, decided to buy the Turkish series *Binbir Gece* (Avci, 2006-2009) (circulated as *Las Mil y Una Noches*) as temporary emergency measure to gain time while the network prepared a new programming schedule (Chamy, 2014; PRODU, 2016). The astounding commercial and audience success of *Binbir Gece* in Chile provoked a *contagion effect* across the region and national networks began to purchase Turkish television drama series and scheduling them in prime time, mostly at the expense of local and regional fiction series. The success of Turkish dramas in Argentina affected TV staff,

actors, directors, and screen writers who complained about the negative effects of an unregulated media market on the local audiovisual industry (Cruz, 2015). Paradoxically, *dizis'* success in Argentina, a country known for its demanding audiences, encouraged other Latin American television networks to purchase Turkish dramas, at the expense of local productions and intra-regional TV fiction exports (Joacogarau, 2015). Unsurprisingly, Mexico and Brazil, the region's leading economies and media producers were less affected by the *Turkish wave* precisely because they are less inclined to consume contents produced by their neighboring countries (Vassallo de Lopes & Greco, 2016). Mexico and Brazil are able to maintain high production standards even during periods of economic crisis because of the relative strength of their economies and the size of their markets. In addition, their audiences had developed deeply rooted viewing habits oriented towards national television contents.

What can we learn about the region from our discussion of the borders of the Latin American television system? If there is a Latin American television system, that system may be characterized as a *fragmented unity* or an *ambivalent integration*. While each nation and each audiovisual industry defines its identity and its goals vis-à-vis neighboring country, the consumption of audiovisual contents from outside the region could be defined in regional terms. In other words, Latin American broadcasters seem to be more prone to follow their neighboring countries' pattern of purchasing extra-regional contents, while at times they are more reluctant to buy products from those neighbors who share similar tastes with their audiences.

## ON THE MULTIPLE CENTERS AND PERIPHERIES OF LATIN AMERICAN TELEVISION SYSTEM

If the previous section focused on different degrees of obstacles encountered by audiovisual contents produced in the region when travelling across its internal borders, the present section will reflect on the multiple centers and peripheries shaping the production and consumption of television in the region. While in the first four decades of television, it was possible to describe national audiences and national audiovisual industries in substantial structural terms, despite significant methodological flaws and inaccuracies, today that move seems much more problematic. According to Straubhaar (1991, 1997), the emerging mediascape reflects a dynamic asymmetrical interdependence that exceeds the nation-state as the exclusive relevant unit of analysis – a still accurate definition

when reflecting upon the contemporary Latin American system. However, we still have to explain how that asymmetrical interdependence materializes through complex networks composed of centers and peripheries that are located across and beyond the formal limits of the region.

Many of the *national* entertainment television contents produced today consist in formats bought from producers from within and outside the region that are adapted for national audiences. Richer countries and TV producers in the region – such as Mexico, Brazil, and U.S Hispanic television – are more prone to purchasing and adapting TV formats from less powerful Latin American audiovisual producers such as Argentina and Colombia. In addition to adding higher production values than the original versions, as they are the first purchasers of TV formats, the most powerful media companies in the region manage to turn themselves into the format's property owners making most of the profits from the international sales. The case of the Colombian *super-format* *Yo Soy Bety, la Fea*, is illustrative of the asymmetrical relation between the Colombian creators and the Mexican producers and distributors (Rivero, 2012; Sinclair, 2014).

Latin American countries with smaller markets and smaller audiovisual industries tend to buy *canned* programs from their richer Latin American fellow countries to fill their daily schedules. This is not a totally new trend in the Latin American television system, but the contemporary media ecosystem, constituted by global cable and streaming networks that offer an immense number of media outlets, tends to discourage the investment of smaller and middle countries in local productions. Establishing partnerships with international media companies and foreign investors is a viable alternative for the less affluent audio-visual industries in the region, but that choice comes at a cost. Although international partnerships help increasing production capacities and technical skills of local media workers, the projects are approved for funding according to their potential appeal to international audiences. The production of fiction series with an *excess* of (manufactured) local flavor narrating histories of crime, corruption, and poverty may look to local and international producers and investors as an appealing means of attracting global audiences. Fiction series that are distributed and/or produced by global media companies and streaming platforms and portray famous Latin American drug lords, popular musicians, and charismatic football players are examples of this evolving formula (Ribke, 2020b, chapter 7).

If critical thinkers of 1960s and 1970s pointed to the dependency patterns of Latin American countries vis-à-vis global powers such as the United States

and European former colonial powers, the analysis of the Latin American television system points to intra-regional hierarchies and power relations among media-producing centers and countries that import media content. Within the Latin American media landscape, there are two main media-producing countries, some mid-sized producers, and many peripheral countries. While Brazil and Mexico's place as central producers is quite constant since the 1970s, other media industries within the region suffered more seriously the impact of economic and political volatility. The case of Venezuela, once a leading regional exporter that stopped producing telenovelas even for its domestic market and the rise of US Hispanic market as a regional consumer and producer of television contents are illustrative of the changing dynamics of the Latin American mediascape (Acosta-Alzuru, 2021; Allen, 2020).

The regional leadership of Brazil and Mexico in the production of media contents has geo-cultural economic ramifications that call for the reformulation of traditional approaches to centers and peripheries. The expansion of Brazilian media Globo conglomerate in Europe in the mid-1980s may provide some interesting insights on the opportunities and limits for the *reversal* of the patterns of media flows between center and periphery. Despite its heavy investment in expanding into the Italian market and then to continental Europe through Telemontecarlo Television, Globo's project suffered heavy economic losses that put the whole media conglomerate at serious risk. In opposition to its failure in the more affluent Italian television market, Globo Network found a much more welcoming environment for their international expansion efforts in Portugal, its former colonial metropolis, but nowadays a small and much less lucrative market (Ribke, 2020a; Sousa, 1997).

The involvement of Mexican media moguls, TV professionals, and artists in the U.S television market points to a dislocation or relocation of producing capabilities, partnerships, and investments that could not be restricted to the national sphere. The involvement of Mexican media corporations and producers in Hispanic U.S television deterred the expansion of Brazilian Network Rede Globo into the U.S, compelling the South American concern to attempt a riskier operation on European soil (Ribke, 2020a; Wallach, 2011). At the same time, the overwhelming production capacities and economic resources of Mexican broadcasters stemmed the emergence of Latino media broadcasters and Latino media contents in U.S television market. According to media scholars who study U.S Hispanic television, economic calculations regarding the need to create larger audiences and the availability of a large stock of television contents

worked against the emergence of local television contents capable of reflecting the complex and heterogeneous cultural and ethnic identity of the Spanish-speaking populations living in the U.S (Dávila, 2012; Mora, 2011; Turow, 1997). Could we characterize the Mexican involvement in the US Hispanic television market as a form of cultural imperialism?

A similar pattern of asymmetrical relationships between centers and peripheries occurs within nation states. Media production companies and broadcasters, television, and advertising professionals are mostly located in the political, cultural, and economic capital cities. Likewise, the television contents produced by them reflect a more cosmopolitan and modern consumer culture and values that distort, disrupt, and even clash with the values and lifestyle of peripheral populations living across Latin American countries. Instead of seeing peripheral audiences as passive consumers and reproducers of the cultural patterns and values promoted from the national political and economic centers, several studies are pointing to a more active role of audiences who might engage on a search for compatible TV contents beyond the national cultural and linguistic boundaries. The preference of Brazilian viewers located in rural communities and peripheral cities of Brazil for Mexican telenovelas and/or Turkish drama series is a thrilling example of the reconfiguration and fragmentation of audiences (Ferreira, 2017; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite, or because of the radical changes in the ways we watch and discuss television, some of those new trends became even more drastic after two years of a global pandemic; this paper proposed to revisit the history of television in Latin America to question and reflect upon the contemporary mediascape in the region. I have suggested that we discuss television production and consumption in Latin America as a transnational television system that has been and continues to be shaped by regional and global politics, by linguistic and cultural differences affecting the circulation of television contents in the region, and by market asymmetries among Latin American nations.

The discussion of regional and global politics in the formation of a transnational Latin American television system has two main goals. The first goal is to call for a deeper and serious understanding of the impact of economic and political processes on the development of regional cultural industries. Revolutions, conflicts, military interventions in politics, and economic instability operated

as centrifugal forces in the formation of regional television industry. Although the relocation of political and economic exiles of television professionals lacks the romantic and/or heroic aura of persecuted political activists or renowned cultural figures of the region, those movements and displacements had an enormous impact on the development of Latin American popular culture/mass culture repertoire. The second aim of connecting Latin American television with regional and global politics to call upon history scholars to include the analysis of television as an extremely important field in the history of the second half of the twentieth century.

Linguistic, cultural, and economic borders and obstacles restricting or facilitating the circulation of television contents may lead us to reflect on structural characteristics that define Latin America in general and the Latin American television system in particular. Despite the often cited linguistic, religious, and cultural homogeneity of the region, the circulation and consumption of television contents produced in the region is constrained by real and sometimes fabricated cultural, economic, and historical barriers among Latin American countries. The more powerful media industries in the region face less obstacles when traversing national borders because of the higher production value of their products. At the same time, they face less competition in their internal markets because their audiences developed deeply rooted habits of watching local television. Yet, historical conflicts, local rivalries, and the willingness to develop their own media industries may hamper a wider circulation of audiovisual contents produced by neighboring countries in the region. Paradoxically, audiovisual products from outside the region benefit from the relative cultural and linguistic homogeneity of the region and television programs that are successful in one country rapidly spread across the continent. I propose in this paper and elsewhere to define the Latin American television system (and perhaps Latin America as a whole) as characterized by a *fragmented unity* or an *ambivalent integration* where intra-regional consumption is less frequent and less homogenous than the extra-regional consumption of audiovisual contents.

Making generalizations about Latin American media industries and comparing them with those of other geo-cultural regions of the world could often lead to distortions and inaccuracies regarding the complex networks of production and consumption in the region and beyond it. If we want to avoid those fallacies, we need to look at the complex networks of exchanges between media producers in the more developed media markets of the region and smaller nations and markets in the region. Brazil and Mexico were and still are the

leading forces in the Latin American television system, but this picture is far from static. While intra-regional patterns of exchange among television industries reflect asymmetrical interdependencies, we should avoid looking at producers and audiences in smaller markets as passive players in the regional and global market game. Government incentives, the development of creative strategies, and the establishment of international partnerships by producers in mid-sized and small media industries could temper, if not totally overturn, economic asymmetries. From the audiences' perspectives, the new global media ecosystem offers the possibility for consumers in peripheral regions within Latin American countries to avoid television products from the country's central capitals and to look for contents that represent similar values and a parallel structure of feeling. How will the traditional media-producing centers of the region accommodate to this new global media environment and what kind of patterns of production and consumption will emerge in the region? Would we still be able to call this emerging network a *Latin American television system*? ■

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