
OPINION: Soap Operas as Mirrors?

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We've been told more than once that art doesn't reflect, but rather recreates, emphasizes, and questions. But many still seek to find in art a mirror of their circumstances. And with television, that aspiration multiplies.

In recent years, for example, people have sought much more in Cuban soap operas than mere entertainment. National productions, perhaps responding to this demand, have become a platform for discussion on crucial issues on the public agenda.

In fact, more than once, these dramatized works have taken on the challenge of addressing sensitive issues of high social impact, which often have not found sufficient coverage in the media. This circumstance often goes hand in hand with the need to give voice, in different media, to issues that permeate the country's daily life and directly affect citizens.

There's even a perception that soap operas here have largely assumed the role that journalism should have: promoting, fostering, and socializing urgent debates about sexuality, family relationships, aging, addictions, crime, racism, homophobia, social inequalities, or the gaps in citizen participation mechanisms... And they have done so from a narrative that honors certain codes of the serial novel, but does not renounce engaging the viewer from a pragmatic position.

There are many cases in which a soap opera has managed to be more incisive and mobilizing than a report, a commentary, or a panel discussion. By situating these themes within the fictional universe of relatable characters and recognizable situations, the dramatized versions have offered a complex, integrative, and often controversial perspective, going beyond the standardized and distant treatment often offered by some traditional news media.

It seems logical, then, that many Cubans have begun to demand from soap operas what they should demand—in terms of commitment to reality—from television news or other analytical spaces. This reversal of expectations is a clear example of the (sometimes naive and excessive) trust placed in fiction to address real life. It's a phenomenon that has been extensively studied by specialists around the world. In the case of Cuba, it also reveals certain

shortcomings of the Cuban media ecosystem, which still faces challenges in the plurality, depth, and breadth with which it addresses the country's current affairs.

It would be wise not to ask for the moon: we must not lose sight of the nature of the genre. The soap opera is, above all, a soap opera-like narrative, centered on emotions, family conflicts, and human passions. Alright, it can (and even should) promote values and invite reflection on social issues... but it cannot be systematically pedagogically enforced or turned into a recipe book of solutions. Instrumentalizing it for didactic purposes dilutes dramatic essences.

There are other genres suitable for a more explicit approach to the public agenda: series, documentaries, comedy shows... and of course, journalism, which should engage with a more critical eye to the complexity of the national environment. In any case, soap operas can coexist with other proposals as part of a system of media and practices that sustain public debate on multiple fronts.

Soap operas, ultimately, are not required to offer definitive answers or clinical diagnoses of the conflicts they show. Although they can serve as an emotional and intellectual catalyst. They can bring taboo topics to the table, generate identification, and trigger inner mechanisms that lead to dialogue within families, work groups, academic and community spaces.

There's one trait that confirms this responsibility assumed by national fiction: Cuban audiences demand a greater commitment to reality from their soap operas than they expect from foreign productions. This is not a contradiction. It has to do with proximity, with a shared context, with the expectation that these stories speak directly to shared experiences. This implies a demand for creative responsibility.

Cuban productions have been pioneers in addressing many topics that have later been picked up by academic research, reports, or public forums. They have often been at the forefront of social debate. What some consider a recent phenomenon actually has solid antecedents: conflicts that caused turmoil were introduced in the 1980s—from generational tensions to infidelity and corruption.

But the truth is that in the last decade the incidence of soap operas have grown remarkably. In part, because there's a greater creative desire to delve into uncomfortable areas of reality. But also because the public has matured in its demands and is willing to embrace dramatization not just as an escape. This is healthy. Although, of course, the ideal would be for these fictional impulses to be supported in other spaces: from academia, the media, and public policies.

The soap opera must participate in this process. It's part of a network of social and cultural communication that, to be effective, must be realized in the dialogue between its components. Sometimes creators are one step ahead of institutions. Other times, it's the audiences that push the wagon. It's plausible that it generates movement, reflection, and critical thinking.

But we must insist on the threat of absolutizing. It's legitimate for there to be lighter, more romantic stories, focused on the ups and downs of love. The public also needs fascination. But even in these proposals, social sensitivity, an ethical approach, and a diverse perspective can be present.

Institutions are responsible for guaranteeing full freedom of creation. Freedom with responsibility, honesty, a critical sense, and a humanistic vocation. Soap operas have much to contribute to a more conscious, more inclusive, and more communicative society... More than mirrors, they should be projections. There's much potential, although some still underestimate them.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSi Translation Staff