

# ALL IN PASAJE ESPERANZA: HOW CHILEAN TELENVELA *VERDADES OCULTAS* BECAME A STREAMING SOAP OPERA

EN EL PASAJE ESPERANZA: C3MO *VERDADES OCULTAS* PAS3 DE TELENVELA CHILENA A SOAP OPERA DE *STREAMING*

NA PASAJE ESPERANZA: COMO *VERDADES OCULTAS* SE TORNOU DA TELENVELA CHILENA A *STREAMING* SOAP OPERA

## Alejandro Bruna

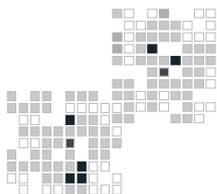
■ PhD candidate in the School of Communications at Pontificia Universidad Cat3lica de Chile, and certified Fellow of The Salzburg Academy Program on Media and Global Change of the Salzburg Global Seminar, as well as a Graduate Student Affiliate at Northwestern University's Center for Latinx Digital Media. He holds a B.A. in Journalism and Social Communication, with an Academic Certificate on Dramaturgy from the Pontificia Universidad Cat3lica de Chile. His research interests include telenovela, digital-storytelling, transmedia and dramatic structure, as well as social media and mass-media influences on television fiction. Besides his academic work, he works as an independent scriptwriter.

■ E-mail: [ahbruna@uc.cl](mailto:ahbruna@uc.cl)

## Lorena Antezana

■ Doctor in Information and Communication from the Catholic University of Louvain, Master in Social Communication and holds a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Chile. She is currently an Associate Professor at the Institute of Communication and Image of the University of Chile. Her research is related to studies on television, critical media reception and consumption. Currently, she directs the FONDECYT Regular project No. 1200108 and is director of NITS, Chile's Television and Society Research Nucleus.

■ E-mail: [lorena.antezana@gmail.com](mailto:lorena.antezana@gmail.com)



## ABSTRACT

On July 24, 2017, Chileans were hooked with the long-suffering story of the Verdugo sisters in *Verdades Ocultas*, a Chilean telenovela anchored in structural concepts of classic melodrama (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009; Cabrujas, 2002). Its success prompted an unexpected lengthening, becoming the longest telenovela in Chilean history to date. Yet narrative shifts led to ample changes regarding dramatic structure and the seriality inherent to its genre (Buonnano, 2005), fluctuating from a telenovela (Mazziotti, 2009; Martín Barbero, 2002) to a *soap opera* (Allen, 1995; Harrington, 2016), giving way to a product perfect for streaming.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: OAP OPERA; TELENVELA; STREAMING; MELODRAMA

## RESUMEN

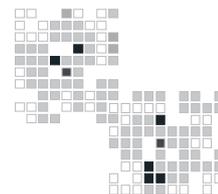
El 24 de julio de 2017 los chilenos quedaron cautivados con la sufrida historia de las hermanas Verdugo en *Verdades Ocultas*, una telenovela chilena estructurada en torno a conceptos del melodrama clásico (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009; Cabrujas, 2002). Su éxito derivó en un inesperado alargue, siendo a la fecha la telenovela chilena más larga de la historia. No obstante, los giros narrativos provocaron amplios cambios en la estructura y la serialidad inherente a su género (Buonnano, 2005), pasando así de una telenovela (Mazziotti, 2009; Martín-Barbero, 2002) a una *soap opera* (Allen, 1995; Harrington, 2016) perfecta para *streaming*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: TELENVELA; SOAP OPERA; STREAMING; MELODRAMA.

## RESUMO

Em 24 de julho de 2017, os chilenos foram cativados pela história de sofrimento das irmãs Verdugo em *Verdades Ocultas*, telenovela chilena ancorada em conceitos do melodrama clássico (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009; Cabrujas, 2002). Seu sucesso resultou em uma extensão inesperada, sendo até hoje a mais longa telenovela chilena da história. No entanto, os giros narrativos provocaram amplas mudanças na estrutura e serialidade inerentes ao seu gênero (Buonnano, 2005), passando de uma telenovela (Mazziotti, 2009; Martín Barbero, 2002) para uma *soap opera* (Allen, 1995; Harrington, 2016) dando lugar a um produto perfeito para *streaming*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: TELENVELA; SOAP OPERA; STREAMING; MELODRAMA.



## 1. Introduction

The Verdugo sisters have become a staple name for Chilean television audiences since the telenovela *Verdades Ocultas/Hidden Truths* first aired in 2017. Their story began when their own mother separated them by selling the youngest of them to overcome economic hardships. Rosario and Agustina, in true telenovela form, were sisters destined to fight for the love of the same man: Tomás. However, over the years, the love triad ceased to be the central plotline, as expected in the genre, and the success of *Verdades Ocultas* resulted in its unexpected lengthening, being to date the longest Chilean telenovela in history – although little remains of a telenovela. In over 1,100 episodes, the show became a melodramatic hybrid with tinges of suspense and thriller, with the sisters surviving plane crashes, face transplants, kidnappings and more than one bloodthirsty serial killer.

This paper explains the transformation of *Verdades Ocultas* as a case study (Yin, 2009) through content analysis, focused on premises from classic telenovela models (Mazziotti, 1996, 2009; Martín-Barbero, 2002) contrasted with structural nodes of the American soap opera (Allen, 1995; Harrington, 2016). Findings show that *Verdades Ocultas* steers away from classic melodrama tropes of daytime telenovela (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009; Valenzuela, 2012; Cabrujas, 2002), in a “soap opera-nization” that has disrupted the seriality inherent to the genre (Buonnano, 2005), presenting a narrative, aesthetic and visual fracture that provided Chilean audiences with a product that holds the narrative and structure of a soap opera, impeccable for streaming.

## 2. Telenovelas: origin and models

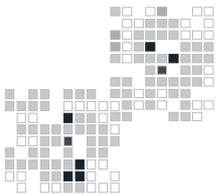
In 1951 a melodramatic television product took over the screen of Brazilian television in São Paulo. An evolution of the radionovela, baptized

by Walter Forster as “telenovela”, *Sua Vida Me Pertence/Your Life Belongs To Me* was, for many, the first great television love story and the birth of one of the most recognizable products in Latin America (Xavier, 2020). Yet the genealogy of the telenovela is not so simple to precise. For others, Cuba is the founding father of the telenovela, with Félix Caignet’s *El derecho de nacer/The Right to Be Born* in 1952 (Valenzuela, 2012). However, if we hold daily transmission as the parameter, the first telenovela would be Mexican, as Fernanda Villeli’s *Senda Prohibida/Forbidden Path* was the first to be broadcasted on a daily basis in 1958.

The development of telenovela history was a simultaneous process in several countries, and, as Mazziotti (1996) explains, to analyze Latin American telenovelas as a single unit is particularly difficult due to the number of existing productions and the dispersion of its manufacturers, where each country depends structurally on its broadcasting model (Mato, 2001). Fox (1997) delves into this point: fluctuating relations between the state, media, public television policies and Latin American society over the years led to different television models, from which certain monopolies such as Globo in Brazil and Televisa in Mexico stood out.

Even though there is a melodramatic tradition that blurs borders, with textual determinations that allow us to recognize telenovelas as such, at the same time telenovelas are limited to structures of their stylistic map and regional production that reflect the particular daily spaces rooted in their country, representative of the local and national references (Mazziotti & Verón, 1993).

Defining telenovela models ultimately implies focusing on main production companies that define circulation and narrative styles (Mazziotti, 2009). Thus, we glimpse three classic consolidated business models that have greater gravitation: Mexico, Brazil and Colombia (Mazziotti, 2009). These will be analyzed and linked to new



references (the Turkish telenovela), differentiated from soap opera tropes, and correlated to *Verdades Ocultas* to see what narrative elements are rescued from the models considered hegemonic in Latin American telenovelas and changes shifted the Chilean telenovela into a streaming product.

### 3. Classic models: stories of love and identity

Telenovelas are structured from melodrama, which the nineteenth century consolidated as a political and communicational discourse that disrupts, in particular, families and their social structure, as well as sentimental relationships. This is due to the discourses of love passions, reconfiguring new ways of loving that constitute a popular story of coexistence (de Brito & Álvarez, 2019).

In addition to its melodramatic tone, with a rhetoric of excess and aesthetics of repetition, the telenovela adheres to a classic narrative matrix. Rincón (2008) synthesizes it as a love story with a selfless heroine that conquers the hero in a virtuous way amongst a network of secrets, lies and deceptions. There is a clear villain, extreme values of good and evil, and revenge, religion and daily family life are intermingled, whilst the promise of love and justice is fulfilled in a social ascent via marriage. These elements define a specific discourse, but not a universal identity. Although the telenovela's essence is melodrama, with a specific narrative scheme, their production has resulted in a certain appropriation of the genre by each country, with a local identity that shapes the different models: its nationalization (Martín-Barbero, 2002).

#### 3.1 Mexico: the strength of the traditional

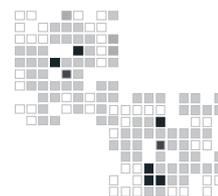
This model is framed within classic melodrama, in constant dialogue with aesthetics and themes related to the cinema and radio of the '40s and '50s

(Mazziotti, 2006). Catholic morality, religiosity and values play a strong role in its structure, both in an evident and latent way, subjugating characters to absolutes of good and evil. There is little room for sensuality or eroticism, seen as sin in the gravitational axis of the narrative that corresponds to villains. The value of family is exacerbated, and the love arch is essentially a story of justice and moral recovery, where happiness is achieved through suffering (Mazziotti, 2006).

Mexican telenovelas maintain classic dramatic and narrative schemes, featuring repetition and normed excess. Secrets are engines in constant tension, where evil intersects and complicates the story while good has the ability to disarm it (Mazziotti, 2006). Characters are archetypes, emphasized in costumes, makeup and speech, responding to the attributes that identify them, such as the heroine, the villain, the ambitious, amongst others. They physically materialize moral values, similar to the allegorical theater of the Middle Ages (Mazziotti, 2006), with a single motivation and without many nuances. Thanks to this, the industry can function with remakes, such as the many versions of *Los Ricos También Lloran/The Rich Also Cry*, telling the same story rooted in archetypal characters that do not radically change what has already been seen, but revamping it using the star system, with fresh faces to reinvent and enhance the leading couple (Mazziotti, 1996). This links to the mythical or folkloric tale, appealing to emotions and catharsis rather than unknown stories (Mazziotti, 2006).

#### 3.2 Brazil: the standard of excellence

Brazilian telenovelas have world-wide recognition due to Globo, the giant of the industry that produces them (Ponti, 2011), and to their internationalization since 1975. They are known for their technical, visual and narrative quality, according to Ortiz, Borelli & Ramos (1989). Rêgo (2011) explains that modern, agile and colorful



visual elements in the scene, the diversification of rich internal and external scenarios, as well as a good soundtrack, enhance the stories that can mix fantastic realism and Brazilian traditional tales through stories that represent national beliefs. There is specific care on the image to express the aesthetic of the middle class, who are its enunciators (Mazziotti, 2006). It is a more permissive model at a moral level, without condemning sexuality and including couples representative of the current world (including LGBTQ+) where sex is pleasure and not a guilty or lewd act. There is a strong erotic component, in a sharp contrast with the Mexican model.

In terms of performances, the naturalistic tone differs from Mexican interpretation: the Brazilian model aims to maintain the realistic acting culture derivative from the theater of the '60s, while the Mexican model feeds on the strong melodramatic tradition of the cinema of the '30s and '50s (Mazziotti, 2006).

Plot wise, Brazilian telenovelas approach new stories and themes, such as cloning in *El Clon/The Clone*. Few remakes are made and, although the narrative is full of unforeseen events and melodrama is maintained, suffering is not a necessity to obtain happiness, giving way to the inclusion of other social issues. Vassallo de Lopes (2004) is critical on this subject, pinpointing that poorly defined narrative structures, in ideological or political terms, are used to deal with issues related to public space, gravitating public opinion to public melodramas. Still, framing of certain themes is seen (Joyce & Martinez, 2016), either regarding political issues (Porto, 2003; 2011) or the reality in the favelas (Rosas-Moreno & Straubhaar, 2015), for example. Telenovelas influence the news agenda, form opinions and impose social discussions (Coutinho, 2000), becoming a suitable medium for health and citizenship information.

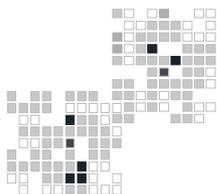
### 3.3 Colombia: between caricaturing and daring

The Colombian model combines traditional and modern elements, seeking new types of protagonists and themes. It plays with the clash of provincial/domestic worlds with urban/work centers or the city. The sense of nationality is highly present, yet the hyper-reality enunciated is not reflected in the telenovela (Fernández-L'Hoeste, 2011), avoiding the inclusion of too many social issues, distancing the dramatic reality of the country (Martín-Barbero, 2002).

Visually it is less meticulous than the Brazilian model, but fresher and more spontaneous (Mazziotti, 2006). There is a visual identity elaborated for each telenovela, developing its own repertoire of resources and conventions that give it a very specific narrative and aesthetic parameters, associated with plot content (García & Reina Gutiérrez, 2012). Its marked musicalization, strong colors and textures stand out on the screen, articulating its focus on sensuality and humor, with overflowing energy and rhythm. In terms of narrative, there is a fearlessness regarding characters, which break paradigms although they tend to be cartoonish, such as the ugly heroine in *Yo soy Betty, la Fea/Ugly Betty* or the heartthrob who suffers from impotence in *Café con Aroma de Mujer/Coffee with the Scent of a Woman*. The weakness of Colombian telenovelas is specifically the dramaturgy, where in spite of a strong start, the scripts are repetitive, and each episode is slow in its narrative progression (Mazziotti, 2006).

### 3.4 Turkey: melodrama at its Turkish best

The success of Turkish telenovelas refers to the Latin American narrative essence, and is structured within two edges: opening the exotic of a country through the window of television, and a central dramatic arc that alludes to the most classic melodrama, with a slower pace and



from a current perspective that refreshes the love stories of Latin America.

The narrative structure and dialogue construction is more direct, presenting the central conflict of the story within the first minutes of the initial episode (Tuccio Valverde, 2020). The script has a more elaborate language, even including poetry within the dialogue. The characters refer to classic archetypes, with a high load of romanticism that mobilizes the central love story, appealing to “the old-fashioned way”. The loving steps are more careful, with a leisurely rhythm where silences and extensive glances in close-up shots slow down the pace of the scenes, building tension for a kiss or merely a holding of hands, in a form of “courtship” unusual in our times (Tuccio Valverde, 2020). The Turkish telenovela has established this “new” cadence and the public seems to appreciate it (Tuccio Valverde, 2020).

Rather than appealing to a particular Turkish nation, ethnic or cultural references, it focuses on markers of physical beauty, modern lifestyles and sets that present a rich space of cultural significance, actual exteriors and interiors that call to a culture that seduces us and that has other rhythms of life, particularly for women imbued in a patriarchal and macho society (Yesil, 2015). The heroine’s search for love, therefore, is similar to the poor and naïve Mexican heroine, who must prove herself worthy of the hero through her impeccable morality.

#### **4. The North American model: soap operas, a different genre**

For many years there was a tendency to associate “soap opera” as the literal English translation of “telenovela,” as if they were the same thing. Today we know they are very different genres, and although soap operas have a link with melodrama, and share the serial structure of telenovelas, there are substantial differences

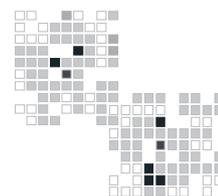
To begin with, the origin of soap operas is

outlined more as a commercial creation rather than a narrative one. From its conception, it was intended as a vehicle for a specific type of advertising, aimed to sell detergent (“soap”) and cleaning products to housewives, focused on its objective female audience (Allen, 2004).

Soaps lack the presence of a leading couple (Mazziotti, 1996; Valenzuela, 2012), which is the most obvious difference, as the central plot of a telenovela is a love story: the ultimate goal of the heroine, or the thematic dimension, is to obtain the love of a man who constantly errs in value terms, where the definitive ethical and social purpose is the fulfillment of a monogamous and heterosexual couple who obtain happiness by constructing a family, validating their love through a religious wedding (Aprea & Martínez, 1996). The lack of central protagonists in soaps results in a story that shifts through all the members of the cast and, as it progresses, focuses on different themes, situations and conflicts, without a specific dramatic arc or narrative subject.

Due to the above, a third difference arises: soaps are produced without an expected ending or closure for characters. For the same reason, a soap can last for decades, such as *General Hospital*, *Coronation Street* or *Eastenders*, unlike telenovelas, which in technical terms, are dramatic stories told in a limited number of episodes, lasting approximately six months to a year (Allen, 1995; Valenzuela, 2012).

The titles mentioned above enlighten us with a fourth difference: in a soap the place where the action takes place is highly relevant. It is usually a high-traffic space, like a hospital, a street, an imposing house, where as many characters as necessary circulate, manipulated by ratings and audience’s taste, introducing different sub-plots. Bielby & Harrington (2005) elaborate on the “telenovela-ization” of US soap operas. Originally soaps had simple and everyday stories, far from



the excesses of melodrama, and representative of the working middle class. Modern soaps operate within the rhetoric of excess, extrapolated to its maximum splendor, for example, with characters who were thought dead reviving five years later (Allen, 2004). This narrative, complex in terms of cuts of dramatic knots and dialogues that are interrupted to present new themes or dramatic arcs, attempts to replicate the daily rhythm of the mothers/audiences (Allen, 2004), as well as to give space to secondary stories according to audience's preferences (Matelski, 1999).

Furthermore, soaps, unlike telenovelas, consist of characters who present little-to-none moral questions, extremist in their positions and neutral in their values: they can go from being heroes to villains within the same episode or from season to season. This differs radically from the telenovela, as the heroine tends to always be good, just and incorruptible in terms of morality, faced against an archetype of a woman completely different from her, her antithesis with altered values (Fuenzalida, Corro & Mujica, 2009).

Finally, soap operas lack national identity, in order to appeal to as many audiences as possible. What is relevant are the concepts of identity, community and legitimacy: there are characters that develop for years looking for their identity; there is a community that is armed and empowered outside of television thanks to the long breath of the stories; and legitimacy in two senses – first that although soap operas lack narrative realism, they present an emotional realism that must be sustained within that same world, and second that their success is based on their economic legitimacy as a product, which depends on the loyalty of their audience (Harrington, 2016). For this, “exotic” or more elaborate plots are included and developed, supposedly, in other countries, as to refresh the plot and generate new audience spotlights (Matelski, 1999).

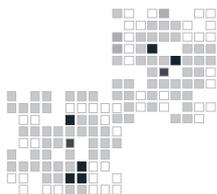
## 5. Methodology: *Verdades Ocultas* as a case study

Within the framework of the ongoing research *Formation of citizen audiences: Adolescents and telenovelas in times of intolerance* (ANID / FONDECYT regular 1200108), *Verdades Ocultas* became a relevant case study (Yin, 2009), not only because of its viewership and high ratings, according to figures from the National Television Council of Chile (CNTV, 2020; 2021), but also because it stands out as the most extensive and most watched daytime telenovela in the history of Chilean television (León, 2021) and as one of the first on-going telenovelas to be streamed in Amazon Prime.

Epistemologically we embrace a narratological perspective, analyzing television discourse focusing on technical qualities of the product, as well as emphasizing the elements that constitute its narration. Content analysis and viewing of the telenovela was done using convenience samples, and specific episodes considered pivotal in the story were chosen. The network's summaries and their “best of” capsules were used, which are a hierarchy of scenes from the telenovela that, according to the network, are the most striking or key to the story. Additional randomized episodes pertinent to the study were also analyzed.

The revision of this material allowed the development of summaries and breakdown of the characters, taking notes about the evolution of plots, the intrigue and audiovisual aspects used. These notes are part of the “reception diary” (Franco, 2012) and allow the construction of plans (spatiality), relationship maps, references of love stories, as well as extended and brief character files.

The analysis was articulated in three main areas: narrativity, televisuality and synthesis or hermeneutic interpretation, which was contrasted with the characteristics of the soap opera mentioned above, as well as classic narrative



plots (Cabrujas, 2002), whilst monitoring the growth of the telenovela in streaming services.

## 6. Results: the “soap-operanization” of *Verdades Ocultas*

*Verdades Ocultas* started in 2017 as a “daytime telenovela”, part of the 3:00 p.m. roster. Studies show that post-Meridian telenovelas are seen especially by women who feel they deserve a rest after household chores; the attention is light, as there are no great narrative expectations (Fuenzalida, 1996; 2011). Normally these telenovelas are the most faithful to the melodramatic structure, with female protagonists that suffer for an impossible love and/or traumatic event which defined their lives.

While this was true for the beginning of *Verdades Ocultas*, its focus on the love story, plot, duration, character development and spatial narrative changed, approaching the North American soap opera in several ways.

The promised central love story, although a cohesive part of the telenovela, is far from the main focus. In terms of narrative milestones, at the level of plot structure, the subplots gain importance during each episode, falling into an Arthurian narrative (Pérez & Garín-Boronat, 2013), with a perennial intermediate, infinite characters and simultaneous adventures that are expanded and often privileged over the love story.

In terms of duration, the ending became suddenly indefinite, including flash forwards that culminated with the ending of the telenovela set in 2050, with no actual religious marriage, and centered on the offsprings of the original love triad becoming fugitives and running away together. The seriality also changed, embracing the concept of seasons (a total of seven), wherein its narrative focus, as years progressed, centered on intrigues, mystery and suspense/thriller, with the emergence of a “big evil” or great villain that was always in crescendo. Love conflicts that

remained pending resurfaced as a mere backdrop.

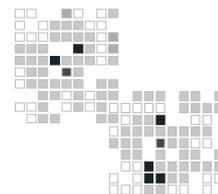
Character development became ambiguous, including plot twists for all the characters, to the point that villains become heroes, and vice versa. The only constant in *Verdades Ocultas* is its main location: Pasaje Esperanza, the passageway most characters lived in at one point or another, echoing soap operas such as *Coronation Street*. Spatially, it also included distant locations to revamp the story, for example, “trips” to Morocco and Spain.

*Verdades Ocultas* turned to classic models for inspiration: domestic life clashed with the work space, certain characters were caricatures, as in the Colombian model; over the top acting and situations referred to the Mexican model, while its slow pace mimicked the Turkish model; the inclusion of social issues, such as racism and AIDS, correlates to the Brazilian model.

## 7. Conclusions: a “soap opera-nized” telenovela for streaming

Telenovelas have a long-standing history, with diffuse beginnings and development of different recognizable models, structured on production systems of each Latin American country. Findings show *Verdades Ocultas* is a hybrid product that, collecting the melodramatic heritage of the classic models from Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Turkey, incorporates narrative variants, transforming classic plots and embracing the North American model: the modern soap opera. At its narrative and structural level, it moves away from the melodramatic matrix and presents a fracture at the narrative, aesthetic and visual level.

These transformations allow to satisfy the needs of the usual consumers of telenovelas while delivering a story with a disrupted seriality that responds to the series format: the episodes are not completely unitary, with a duration of no more than 30 minutes, leaving multiple plot lines that

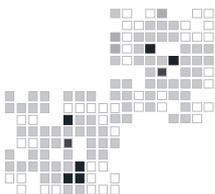


dissolve in the face of a greater conflict, diluting the love story with a fragmented narrative. It is also evident the division of blocks in each episode as well as the split of the telenovela into seven seasons, where the intrigue does not correlate with the progressive structure that defines the telenovela, but rather a melodramatic hybrid that

responds to virtual platforms (Morazzo, 2018). As such, today *Verdades Ocultas* can be seen on streaming services such as Amazon Prime, Movistar Plus and the network's streaming channels where audiences can enjoy different seasons without a link to an everlasting love story.

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