

Betty the Beautiful and Colombia the Ugly

A popular Colombian *telenovela* in its socioeconomic context and as ideological text

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Abstract

Se presenta un análisis de la popular telenovela colombiana Betty la Fea desde la perspectiva de los Estudios Culturales. Tomando como base los antecedentes sobre los estereotipos difundidos por los medios acerca de grupos social y culturalmente subordinados, el autor establece la relación entre la construcción ideológica y hegemónica que se elabora en dicha producción mediática y su relación con la realidad social, política y económica de Colombia, realidad que actúa como contexto.

Soap Operas, as media products, are often seen as vehicles for the exploitation of sentimentality and romance. They are generally directed at a female audience and often act to reinforce the status quo, especially "with respect to the nature of sex roles and of interpersonal relationships in a patriarchal society."¹ As fiction, they often represent a chance for the viewer to escape reality and enter the realm of dreams and fiction, a sphere where critical judgement is suspended and mindless enjoyment takes over.² That is not to say that viewers cannot distinguish between fact and fiction:³ audien-

ces do have the capacity to be active as social agents, and they are not just passive victims of the media. Some viewers may even find soaps useful in providing information about social mores, how to behave socially, and generally, even in providing information about the world.⁴ But lacking that element of "alienation" from the media product that Berthold Brecht thought so important in his brand of theater, the viewer is practically at the mercy of the media product to do its work. Part of this "work" is to be a filter of reality,⁵ and most often, to transmit values and ideas for the justification and reification of relations of domination / subordination. In other words, the media often works to foster the ideology of the dominant groups, and to support the reproduction of the social structures in which the media product originates. As Coltrane (2000)⁶ asserts, "*Media images... promote acceptance of current social arrangements, and reassure people that things are the way they ought to be... the medium also tends to misrepresent social issues in the service of dominant ideologies and economic interests.*" For that reason, audiences must be made "*critically aware of images in the*

- 1 Rogers, Deborah D. (1991). *Daze of Our Lives: The Soap Opera as Feminine Text*. *Journal of American Culture*, 14: winter.
- 2 See Desser, David (1991). *The Cinematic Melting Pot: Ethnicity, Jews, and Psychoanalysis*. In Lester D. Friedman (Ed.) (1991). *Unspeakable Images, Ethnicity and the American Cinema*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- 3 McAnany, Emile G., Antonio C. *La Pastina* (1994). *Telenovela Audiences: a Review and Methodological Critique of Latin American Research*. *Communication Research*, December 1994, 21:6.

- 4 Greenberg Bradley S., Mark G. Woods (1999). *The Soaps: Their Sex, Gratifications and Outcomes*. *Journal of Sex Research*, August 1999, 36:3
- 5 Rodríguez, Clara (Ed.) (1997). *Latino Looks, Images of Latinas and Latinos in the US Media*. Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 9.
- 6 Coltrane, Scott, Messineo, Linda (2000). *The Perpetuation of Subtle Prejudice: Race and Gender Imagery in 1990s Television Advertising*. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*. V42 n5-6 p363-89 March 2000, page 1.

media so that they do not substitute them for reality.”⁷

One way the media does this ideological work is by “teaching.” Using images from education, in examining problems of media image analysis, Cortés⁸ argues that the process of studying the media involves three basic phases: production (“filmmaking”), content, and impact. Films (which I will equate here to “media products” to include television programs) function as intentional or non-intentional “teachers,” as effective or non-effective “textbooks,” and audiences are conscious or unconscious “learners.” Corresponding to each of these three phases, media research involves three distinct forms of analysis: “control analysis,” which examines the factors influencing a media product and the process of its production; the “content analysis” of completed media products; and “impact analysis,” which investigates the images that develop in the minds of viewers.⁹ The analysis presented here of a Spanish language telenovela broadcast in the US is based on a variety of the content analysis method, discourse analysis.

To study the impact of the media, adds Cortés, is perhaps the most important area but the most difficult to do. Nevertheless, some studies have demonstrated the results of media exposure, after attempting to assess media impact in controlled situations. For example, in the 1930’s, Peterson and Thurstone (1933) showed that presentations of the film *The Birth of A Nation* (1915) increased viewer prejudice towards Blacks; Rosen (1948) found that the anti-anti-Semitic film *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (1947) diminished prejudice towards Jews. And Greenberg (1972) found that children thought that TV portrayed Blacks accurately, even when the images presented in shows contradicted their actual experiences with members of that group.¹⁰

Another way in which the media work on audiences is by disseminating and repeating stereotypes that operate as rationales for exclusion, difference and inferiority. These rationales can then

be believed and internalized by those viewers to whom the stereotypes make reference.¹¹ Students of the media in the US have pointed out the frequent reliance of the media on stereotypes. Latino males are often negatively portrayed. In addition to the “greaser” and the “bandit,” for example, there are other stereotypes of Latinos that abound in US film, including the casting of Latinos and Latinas as the “male buffoon” and the “Mexican spitfire.”¹² One of the most frequent stereotypes associated with Latinos is that of the “Latin lover.” Some scholars of the media have argued that the stereotype of the “Latin lover” is really meant to depict a “Latin loser,” a one-dimensional, sterile and asexual comedic figure who always loses the girl the moment she meets a Yankee.¹³

One of the most important lines of research on the media looks at the relationship between media content and the socio-historical context. In this line of research it has been argued that the images of Latinos often reflect the political, historical and economic conditions of a period,¹⁴ and research on this topic has shown that images of Latinos in US films closely correspond with distinct historical periods. These include the “silent and early talkie era” (1911-39), the “Good Neighbor era” (pre- and post World War II), the “cold war era” (50’s and 60’s), and the “modern era” (70’s to present.)¹⁵

During the Second World War, for example, a time in which US policy dictated the need to insure the loyalty of Latin-Americans to the Allied side, Disney released a “good neighbor” animated film titled *The Three Caballeros* (1943). In that film, Latin America is shown as a fun and friendly place, in contrast to the usual “greaser” and bandit-ridden place that was the norm during the early talkies era. The “greaser” and “bandit,” however, are stereotypes that have evolved and are still in

7 Rodríguez Clara (1997). Op. Cit., pp. 9.

8 Cortés, Carlos E. (1997). *Chicanas in Film: History of an Image*. Ch. 7 p. 121, in Rodríguez, Clara, (Ed.), *Latino Images*, Op. Cit.

9 Ibid., pp. 122.

10 Ibid.

11 Ramírez Berg, Charles (1997). *Stereotyping in Films in general and of the Hispanic in Particular*. Chapter 6 in Rodríguez, Clara, *Latino Looks...* (Op. Cit.) pp. 119.

12 Ramírez Berg, (1997) Ibid.

13 García Berumen (1997) in Rodríguez C. (1997) Op. Cit., pp. 3.

14 Rodríguez Clara (1997), Op. Cit., pp. 7.

15 Rodríguez, Clara (2001). *Personal communication*. See also Carlos E. Cortés (1997). *Chicanas in Film: History of an Image*, Ch. 7 p. 126, in Rodríguez, Clara, (Ed.), *Latino Images*, Op. Cit.

use in different forms, incarnated today, for example, in the Latino drug trafficker.

In the US, a society in which race and ethnicity have been master stratification markers, stereotyping has had a role in controlling the "other" (the nonwhites, women, or the lower class,) by justifying social cleavages based on race, class and gender. Since stereotypes are important and useful as nuts and bolts in the ideological work of the media, students of these issues point out that the game is not just to spot them, which is often easy, but to concentrate on them as patterns which attribute differential traits to a group. It is also more important to understand the implications of such use and attributions.¹⁶

Research on the media by scholars working within the cultural studies approach examine ways to understand media content from the point of view of ideological hegemony and social structure reproduction. From this perspective it is argued that in adjusting content in search for widening the audience appeal (so as to insure the flow of profits) media products contain "textual operations."¹⁷ Those operations advance dominant ideology but still, given the conditions of broadcast, production, and reception, permit both preferred and alternative readings on the part of the audience. Gina Marchetti (1991) analyses the film *The Year of the Dragon* (1985) to show the ways in which "textual operations" work in the media text. She argues that the media have the power to define differences, reinforce boundaries, and maintain the status quo by reproducing ideology. Because of the need to make a profit (which is contingent upon audience reception,) media producers must take into account the characteristics and expectations of the audience, and the audience's heterogeneity must be incorporated into the product. This allows for the possibility of multiple readings by the viewers because, while espousing the dominant ideology, media producers realize that they need to widen their product's appeal to those outside of the cultural mainstream. As a result, the product often "plays these various viewer positions one against the other, so that a text can appear to es-

pouse liberal attitudes... while maintaining a rigid hierarchy or class and gender."¹⁸ *The Year of the Dragon* (1985), for example, played with sexual identity, ethnicity and distinctions of class that do not allow for a straightforward reading "as unambiguously supportive of the white, male, middle class establishment."¹⁹

Examining the media products of other societies presents some challenges. For example, perspectives of ethnicity, class and gender within which US media studies are approached cannot be so easily extended to other cultures. Also in some cases the products are so sophisticated that stereotypes and the overall ideological thrust are not so easily identifiable. I will approach some of those challenges here to study a popular and widely acclaimed Colombian telenovela that was broadcast in 21 countries,²⁰ with reliance upon the cultural studies approach. This approach will help to examine the ideological and hegemonic operations of this media product. I will attempt to locate its content as a product of a socio-political context and I will formulate an alternative reading of it.

The hypotheses that I seek to support are first, that the content of this telenovela closely corresponds with Colombia's historical, political and socioeconomic context, even though, in its content, a direct examination of social conflicts is avoided. Second, I will attempt to show that this is a coded text whose real object is not the protagonist nor the stereotypes of beauty that are supposedly addressed, but ideological operations that seek to address grave challenges to the class hegemony present in the current sociopolitical context of the country. In other words, I will argue that underlying what seems to be a liberal and progressive work, that on a superficial level attempts to attack the dominant relationships of gender and class, there is an ideological work that supports class and gender hegemony, and to a lesser degree,²¹ ethnic subordination. The

16 Ramirez Berg, Charles (1997). *Stereotyping in Films...* Op. Cit.

17 Marchetti (1991). *Ethnicity, the Cinema and Cultural Studies*, Ch. 10 in Lester D. Friedman, ed. (1991) *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*. Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, pp. 285.

18 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 280.

19 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 279.

20 Radio Cadena Nacional SA. *Betty la Fea*. RCN Television Web Pages, May 2000.

21 "Lesser" only to the degree that ethnicity is of secondary relevance in the telenovela's plot, not because the issue is thought to be of less importance in real life. As will become evident ahead, the non-emphasis on ethnicity issues has its own relevance and meaning.

underlying ideological work supports, legitimizes and rationalizes the structures of social domination, and directly contradicts what appears to be the main denotative content. The advancement of ideological positions supportive of class hegemony is neither overt nor comprehensive; nevertheless, the work represents the advancement of preferred interpretations of national reality. The ideological positions advanced are not standard "us-them" dichotomies nor reflect the right vs. left ideological positions prevalent in earlier "cold war" times and that could easily be articulated in a situation of social conflict that could be analyzed in such terms. Instead, they are the result of the negotiation and adaptation of class positions, with a pragmatic sense, to the challenges of the historical present. Such articulations of ideology, which will become clearer in the context of the whole text and in my elaboration of its symbolic trust, address pivotal issues. These issues are addressed both in specific speeches and in the overall thrust of the plot, and reflect the adaptations and negotiations with which the dominant class, through the unwitting consciousness of the author, responds to strong armed and ideological challenges to the hegemonic status quo. One way the hegemonic ideology responds to these challenges is through speeches that articulate views on ethics and morality, on the responsibility of generations, on the supposedly inclusionary character of Colombian society with respect to class, gender and ethnicity. Also, hegemonic ideology find expression in discourse that refers to actual ways of proceeding towards the eventual solution of the social conflict, including "forgiveness" and "forgetfulness" of its historical roots.

The Cultural Studies perspective

The cultural studies approach, incorporating elements of Marxist and semiotic theory, makes ideology one of the main focuses of study. Cultural theory, as applied to the study of the media, is a useful way to examine the articulation between texts and structures of class, gender, race and ethnicity, and of the ideologies that sustain and reproduce them. This analysis will be based on Marchetti's²² theoretical framework, and the following discussion is based on her theoretical outline.

22 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit.

Departing from critical theory's conception of the direct relationship between material forces and ruling ideas as the "material relationships grasped as ideas,"²³ cultural studies theorists have debated the ways in which this relationship operates through the mediation of institutions, language and subjectivity. However, theorists in cultural studies believe that Marx's conception of a direct causal relationship between a "false consciousness" that can simply be eradicated by a change in the economic base is not sufficiently explanatory. Consequently, they look to Althusser and Gramsci for a more complete understanding of the working of ideology. In that regard, Althusser argues that beyond the enforcing machinery of the state, institutions with ideological functions have an important role in reproducing and maintaining the social order. This is done through the fashioning of patterns of ideas that connect individuals to their actual conditions of existence and that promote consensus and acceptance of such conditions. The media is one of such institutions.

In Althusser's view, ideology constitutes subjectivity through the process of socialization. This occurs within a society structured by class, in a deterministic way, providing the patterns within which individuals get organized into gender, ethnic, and class structures, through contributing to the development of identity and through the acquisition of language.²⁴ Subjectivity is both constituted with the help of ideology and becomes a subject to ideology. Social norms are "naturalized" (legitimized, reified, presented as natural and unchangeable) through the practices of the ideological apparatuses of the state. Norms constitute an important part of our sense of selves, identity, and our sense of our relationship to society and to other people.²⁵ The media has an important part to play in the constant construction of the subject and of ideology, in a process that Althusser calls "interpellation."²⁶

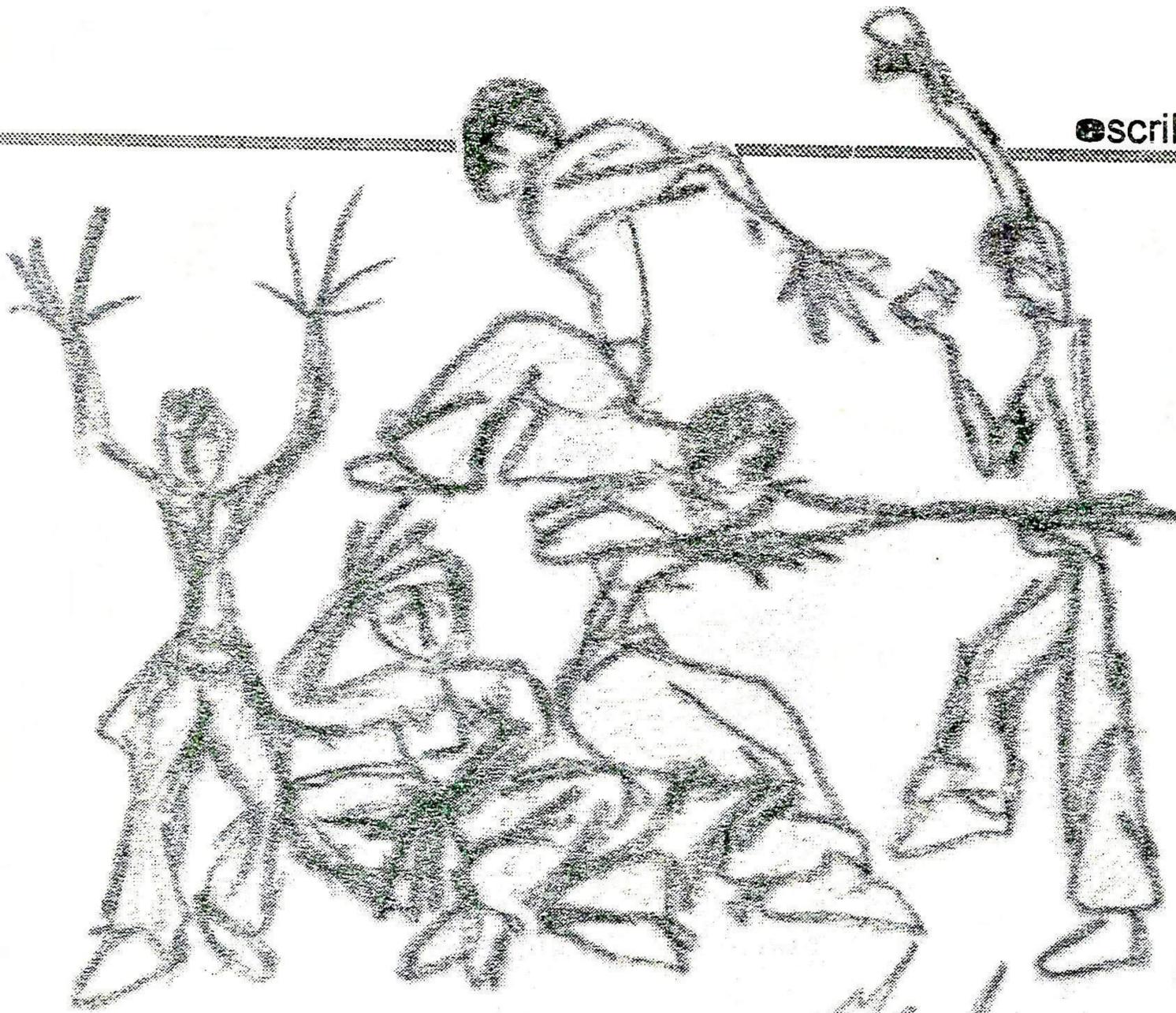
Recognizing a weakness in Althusser's failure to consider the possibility of ideological resistance

23 Marx, Karl (1845-46) in Marchetti (1991) Op. Cit., pp. 280.

24 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit.

25 Boniface, Liz, Mac Ilroy, Guy. *Soap Opera: Fiction or Fantasy?* Critical Arts, 1994, 8:1-2.

26 Boniface et. al., Ibid.



and struggle, theorists in cultural studies have called upon Gramsci's reflections on ideology. Gramsci emphasizes contradiction and a constant struggle for power by the ruling class for the maintenance of hegemony over the social body. By hegemony, Gramsci defines the socialization process, in which ideas contained in symbolic and cultural practices orient people's thinking to accept a given reality and their roles in society as 'natural.'²⁷ In Gramsci's view, hegemony is sustained not only through coercion but also through consensus. Power relations are reified through "common sense," which results in a masquerading of power relations as ahistorical, natural and unquestionable. "Common sense," however, is actually historical and subject to constant ideological assault, reformulation and accommodation.²⁸

Thus borrowing from Althusser and Gramsci, cultural studies scholars see the discursive strategies of the media as constantly having to contend with ideological crosscurrents. From Althusser originates a concern for the role of structure and

its relation to socialization, psychology and language; and, from Gramsci, the view of ideology as historically determined, fragmentary, always in flux, and as accommodating to the historical moment.²⁹

Within cultural studies, subcultures are viewed as any coherent group that defines itself as outside the cultural mainstream along cleavages of gender, ethnicity, class, and others.³⁰ A subculture's identity comes from the power of the dominant culture to define it. As outsiders to the mainstream, subcultures live in a contradictory relationship to the dominant culture, constantly adopting and transforming elements from it, resisting it or rejecting it outright. Subcultures thus have the possibility of making their own critique and reading from the materials presented by the media.

In this regard, Stuart Hall argues that the reception of texts is a dynamic, dialectical process that leaves open the possibility of alternative readings. This includes the preferred readings advanced by the coder, as well as readings originating in

27 Lye, John, (1997). *Ideology: A Brief Guide*. Found at <http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/ideology.html>. Downloaded July 15, 2001.

28 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 282.

29 Marchetti (1991), Ibid.

30 Hebdige, D. C., Simon Frith, Angela McRobbie (undocumented reference) in Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 282.

the decoder's interpretations, which he calls the preferred/dominant and the negotiated and oppositional readings. Social characteristics and cultural differences in the audience multiply these possibilities.³¹

Fiske describes the basis for alternative interpretations in his theory of "semiotic excess." Semiotic excess is meaning that escapes the control of the dominant group once the ideological, hegemonic work is performed, and is "available for the culturally subordinate to use for their own cultural and political interests... the dominant and the oppositional are simultaneously present in both the text and its readings. The dominant is found in the preferred reading, the oppositional in the semiotic excess that the preferred reading attempts to marginalize, but that can never be finally or totally controlled by the dominant."³²

For the cultural studies perspective, then, media texts are open to the possibility of many decodings and are sites where not only the constant ideological struggle in a society can be observed, but where they have an important locus. While the media industry has its own interests in perpetuating the dominant ideology, it is constrained in this function by the need to make a profit and to adapt to the market. Therefore, viewers out of the mainstream culture must also derive pleasure from the text, contained into the final product.³³

Historical evolution of media images

Several works in Clara Rodriguez's edited book on Latino images in the US media³⁴ examine the relationship of the historical context to the content and depictions contained in the media. Among them is the work by Noriega, who examines the treatment of ethnicity, and by Ramírez Berg,

in his treatment of Hispanic stereotypes. Also, the work by Cortés on the history of Chicanas in film; by Pérez, examining Puerto Rican images in US films, and by Sandoval Sánchez, presenting an ideological reading of the film *West Side Story* (1961) and of the play of the same title (1951).

Although my reading of the above researchers, particularly pertaining other works, has not been exhaustive, I think I'm justified to say on the basis of the examination of the aforementioned works, that they do not present a thoroughly articulated theoretical rationale for the important connection of the historical context to the content and depictions contained in the media. Perhaps the connection between the socioeconomic and historical context of the media does not need to be explained theoretically. That may be the case because it is common sense that the media is a product of its times, and of the social and ideological conditions that give rise to media products, since media creators and producers live in a specific time and space. In other words, "texts are produced by socially situated speakers and writers."³⁵ The ways in which the socioeconomic and historical context are related, however, are an important issue to ponder and to research.

It is possible that an approximation to a theoretical rationale for the connection between socio-historical developments and the ideological content of media products, like the one that I will examine here, can be built by going back to the theoretical framework in cultural studies presented by Marchetti (1991). Such theoretical frame would begin with Marx when he argues that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i. e., the class that is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force."³⁶ Marx explicitly refers here to a temporal dimension, by saying "in every epo-

31 Hall, Stuart. *Encoding-Decoding*, in Stuart Hall et. al. (editors) *Culture, Media, Language* (1980). London: U. of Birmingham; cited in Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit.

32 Fiske, John. *Television: Polysemy and Popularity*. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, December 1986:403; in Marchetti (1991), op. Cit.

33 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit.

34 Rodriguez, Clara (Editor) (1997). *Latino Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the US Media*. Boulder: Westview Press.

35 Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (1990). *Reading Images*. Victoria: Deakin University Press. Quoted in Van Dijk, Teun A. (1998). *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Second draft. Found at <http://www.hum.uva.nl/~teun/cda.htm>. Downloaded July 15, 2001. No page numbers.

36 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *The German Ideology*. C. J. Arthur, ed., New York: International Publishers, 1970, p. 64. Cited in Marchetti, Gina (1991). *Ethnicity, the Cinema and Cultural studies*. Op. Cit., pp. 280; italics in the text.

ch," making clear that the ideology of the mid-nineteenth century bourgeoisie could only emerge in the context of the material relations of that time, and are not determined by the material relations of past epochs. Thus early bourgeois ideology could only be determined by the type of capitalism then in development and could not be feudal, Roman or Greek in character. Althusser's treatment of the ways in which ideology constitutes its own subject in socialization, within a class-stratified society³⁷ takes what has been understood to be Marx's deterministic equation of structure and culture into what has been taken to be the psychological realm but as constrained within social structures. In this process, the ideological apparatuses of the state help in the formation of ideology with their role in shaping "*the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.*"³⁸ Itself deterministic, Althusser's view of the relationship between the historical moment and media content can be taken beyond being deterministic and mechanistic on the basis of Gramsci's views. According to Gramsci, the ruling class solidifies its power not only through the coercive power of the repressive agencies of the state but through consensus and "common sense."³⁹ Furthermore, Gramsci emphasizes that ideology is not set in stone but it is "*historical, fragmentary, constantly in flux, and subject to the exigencies of the moment.*"⁴⁰ Ideology thus evolves and adapts to its times, addressing, in our case, through the media, those concerns and core beliefs that are most challenged within a given context.

In the media text that I will examine I will show how symbolically the historical events and social structures of the society in which it was produced are reflected at least metaphorically and often explicitly. A few examples that I will present ahead from the literature surveyed at the beginning of this section would illustrate other instances of such relationships. This relationship is frequent and real, as such examples will make clear; it goes beyond the obvious fact that historical events are often the basis for film scripts. Furthermore, the relationship

refers also to the treatment that issues reflected in film or TV receive, according to the ideas and thinking patterns prevalent at the time of their production, which I would argue, not only reflect but in turn influence the context of socio-economic and power relations.

In the case of the US, and probably everywhere, media content is often shaped not only by historical events but also by state policy, and by the need to constantly prop up the ideological foundations of the social system. A detailed review of such instances is precluded here. The interested reader is hereby referred to the studies included in section II of Clara Rodríguez's book and to the authors mentioned at the introduction to this section, which generally refer to issues of Latino ethnicity and representation in the media. I will mention here, however, a few examples. These include the depictions of Mexicans during the earlier age of the cinema, in which they were depicted as the "greaser" and the "bandit" to which I alluded already. These depictions reflected the border conflicts that began with the first Anglo settlements of Texas (then a part of the Mexican state) in the 1820s.⁴¹ In these depictions, Mexicans were constructed as sexually charged, violent and untrustworthy savages. Mexicans were thus symbolically constructed to legitimize their confinement into a social space that precluded their incorporation into the American republic.

Later on, there appeared the Mexican-as-social-problem films, in which the underlying issues were, again, the difficulties inherent to the incorporation of the now annexed Mexicans into American institutions. In these films, Mexicans were again depicted as inherently inferior, as beings prone to violence and criminality, and as child-like in their inability to defend themselves, a task thus left to the care of the activist American judicial system.⁴² These films appeared in the context of massive repatriations of Mexican workers (400,000 between 1929 and 1934).⁴³ These workers had come in large numbers during WW I to fill US labor shortages. Also,

37 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 281.

38 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 281.

39 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 281.

40 Marchetti (1991), Op. Cit., pp. 282.

41 Noriega, Chon. (1997). *Citizen Chicano: The Trials and Titillations of Ethnicity in the American Cinema, 1935-1962*; Chapter 5 in Rodríguez, Clara, editor, (1997), Op. Cit.

42 Noriega, (1997) Ibid., pp. 87.

43 Noriega, (1997) Ibid., pp. 86.

these films appeared in the context of the subsequent importation of Mexican workers during WW II, and of the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon case. This famous case led to false accusations and to the repression of Mexicans in Los Angeles, and was depicted years later in the film *Zoot Suit* (1981).⁴⁴

US policy has also explicitly served to shape films. That was the case between 1934 and 1968, through the Hays Office or Production Code Administration (PCA), which monitored and defined "the outer limits of ideological expression" in films.⁴⁵ PCA paid special attention to specific state policies like the "good neighbor" policy initiated by F. D. Roosevelt, advising producers to watch content so that relations with "our neighbors to the South"⁴⁶ were not chafed. During WW II, the PCA established an Inter-American section charged with "*spreading the gospel of the Americas' common stake in this struggle,*"⁴⁷ a task

44 Noriega, (1997) *Ibid.*, pp. 87. "*The incident, on August 1, 1942, in which a Mexican-American youth was found dead after a party (perhaps run over by a hit-and-run driver), resulted in the arrest and conviction of twenty-two Mexican-American youths for criminal conspiracy, assault, and murder. The next summer, in an event reported extensively in the press as a military offensive, Anglo servicemen in 'taxicab brigades' entered the barrio in search of pachucos or zoot-suiters. The servicemen, in ... a 'ritual of role reversal,' stripped the Mexican-American youths of their zoot suits and shaved their hair, 'aggressively mimicking and reenacting their own experience in basic training.' On October 4, 1944, two years after the Sleepy Lagoon case, the convictions were reversed on appeal for lack of evidence, and the judge was cited for bias and violation of the defendants' constitutional rights. Despite the court reversal and the psychological rationale for the zoot-suit riots, the institutional response to these events -press coverage, popular culture, police and FBI investigations-established both the inherent 'criminality' of Mexican-American youths and the role of the state as surrogate 'parent.' The trial also maintained the need for an 'external guiding intelligence' ... since 'Mexicans' were understood to be at once prone to violence and yet unable to defend themselves. In this manner, the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee -which included Hollywood activists such as Orson Welles, Anthony Quinn, and Rita Hayworth (the latter two of Hispanic descent)- was viewed as a foreign-inspired conspiracy rather than as 'one of the more enduring coalitions between Mexicans, Jews, Blacks, and Anglos in American history.'*"

45 Noriega, (1997) *Ibid.* pp. 87.

46 Noriega, (1997) *Ibid.*, pp. 88.

47 Noriega, (1997) *Ibid.*, pp. 89.

that Donald Duck, accompanied by a nondescript Mexican-looking cartoon and a Brazilian character, joyfully took to in Disney's film *The Three Caballeros* (1943).

The question to ask is how are cultural workers, especially writers, affected by the socio-historical context and by hegemonic ideology? There is more to that than the process of internalization of the cultural values that is achieved in socialization, because a mechanistic view of this connection would just assume that there is no power of agency in cultural actors. Creative -not to mention producing- personnel, are also affected by the needs of the market, which have to be taken into account in order to insure the flow of profits. Also, even though scriptwriters may claim creative freedom, it is doubtful that this is ever the case, except perhaps in the case of independently produced films or in the case of works by exceptional and recognized authors/directors. As the case of *West Side Story* (1961) illustrates, the later are often the conduit for mainstream ideology just like any other authors of media products can be.

As subjects of socialization, creative workers are not exempt from having their subjectivity shaped by dominant ideology and by the social relationships in which they live. Whatever the intentions of the author/producer, the readings that audiences make are out of the author's control once the product is broadcast. The error of judging a work of art by its author's intentions is referred to in media studies as the "intentional fallacy."⁴⁸ Charles Ramírez Berg adds other reasons for treating the media product as a text, based on Lacan's "*treatment of the text as psyche ... which gives the critic a rationale for analyzing the text rather than the individual actor, character or reader.*"⁴⁹

An example of how predominant mores and ideologies enter media products through the minds of creators regardless of their artistic standing, is the case of the quasi-cultural icon *West Side Story* (1961). This is a film that the unsuspecting viewer

48 Monaco, James (1981). *How to Read a Film*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 436.

49 Ramírez Berg, Charles, (1997). *Stereotyping in Films in General and of the Hispanic in Particular*. Chapter 6 in Rodríguez, Clara. *Latino Looks...* Op. Cit., pp. 110.

may take to be a homage to Puerto Ricans. However, as Alberto Sandoval Sánchez notes, an alternative reading of this film can be made. He calls this alternative reading the "East Side History of hatred/racism."⁵⁰ In the musical number "America," for example, Sandoval sees an open political campaign for assimilation into American cultural standards sung by a Puerto Rican.⁵¹ In general terms, the film reflects the construction of Puerto Ricans as racial Others, as colored and of doubtful assimilable status, even though their presence in the US results from a history⁵² of colonialism and from specific US imperial policies. Those policies and the history of the quasi-forced immigration of Puerto Ricans-rendered-displaced-workers by US development interests in Puerto Rico⁵³ are ignored in the play. Puerto Ricans are seen as alien invaders that compete for the social space until then controlled by other more assimilable minorities of European origin.⁵⁴ Additionally, the film contains every stereotype and slur that has traditionally served to demean and localize the Puerto Rican to the low social status to which they were confined in the racialization process, including charges of social dysfunction, loose morality, proneness to violence, filth, and disease.⁵⁵ The film, produced by artists who had never seen a Puerto Rican, was initially conceived to be the story of a couple for which various cultural origins were considered. The Puerto Rican immigration of the 50s presented to the film's creators the opportunity to actualize the

work and to articulate ideas of exclusion-inclusion that could have been articulated with any other ethnic group that was previously in consideration.⁵⁶

In the literature examined above, it becomes evident that the analysis of the media's functions and influences must go beyond seeing media products as entertainment to be judged merely by whatever artistic merit they may have, if any. Media products can be conceptualized as being encoded texts that provide models of behavior, transmit values and views, and seek to construct or position groups of people into dominant or subordinate social spaces, often in step with historical reality and on behalf of political and economic expediency. One interesting way to examine the purposes and effects of the media is through the analysis of the ideological operations which seek to define, reinforce and reproduce social structures, and that at critical historical moments address challenges to the position of groups that socially and economically benefit from access and control to the media. The dependence of the media on markets forces authors and producers to present content that though coded, is left open to interpretations or decodings other than those that would be preferred by those in control. Audiences, however, do not usually have the heuristic tools to formulate such alternative interpretations, and may tend towards the acceptance of views and beliefs that come from authoritative sources,⁵⁷ and whose credibility often derives from the perceived power of its authors. In such way, the power position of the speakers lends increased credibility to their discourse, while that of minorities or women is seen as less credible.⁵⁸ In addition, the absence of other public discourses or media containing information that may serve as the basis for alternative interpretations simply precludes their formulation.⁵⁹

In societies in which struggles for power lead to civil conflict, like the case of Colombia, the coun-

50 Sandoval Sánchez, Alberto (1997). *West Side Story: A Puerto Rican Reading of "America."* Chapter 9 in Rodríguez, Clara, editor, *Latino Looks...»* (1997), Op. Cit.

51 Rita Moreno, who received an Oscar for her performance. Sandoval Sanchez, Ibid., pp. 165.

52 Sandoval Sánchez points out that the use of the term "story" instead of "history" seeks to deny the historicity of why and how the Puerto Ricans came to find themselves in New York City. Sandoval, (1997) Ibid., pp. 168.

53 "Operation Bootstrap," implemented during the 40s and 50s.

54 The Puerto Rican writer Piri Thomas gives his own, non-embellished version of the conflicts between Puerto Rican youth and the previous inhabitants of the areas they came to occupy (East Harlem) in his masterpiece *Down These Mean Streets* (1967-1991) New York: Random House.

55 Rodríguez-Morazzani, Roberto P. (1996). *Beyond the Rainbow: Mapping the Discourse on Puerto Ricans and "Race."* Centro Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College CUNY, Vol. 8, 1&2, 1996.

56 Sandoval, (1997) Op. Cit.

57 Van Dijk, Teun A. (1998). *Critical Discourse Analysis.* Second draft. Found at <http://www.hum.uva.nl/~teun/cda.htm>. Downloaded July 15, 2001. No page numbers.

58 Van Dijk (1998) Ibid.

59 Downing, J. (1984). *Radical Media: the Political Experience of Alternative Communication.* Boston: South End Press. Quoted in Van Dijk, Teun A. (1998) Ibid.

try in which the text to be analyzed here originates, the media is a powerful tool for the dissemination of status-reinforcing discourse. That discourse seeks to rationalize the historical roots and developments of the social conflict. In the media, controlled by powerful economic conglomerates that are licensed and supervised by the state, the groups in power have an important power base. From their soapbox in the media, those who dominate a society put forward assumptions about what is just, right and natural about social relations; inconvenient fact is distorted and obscured; and opposing views are simply left out or silenced. Finally, visions of human possibility are advanced, which can be summarized simply as the acceptance of the status quo and the negation of the possibility of social restructuring.

Methodology

Sample

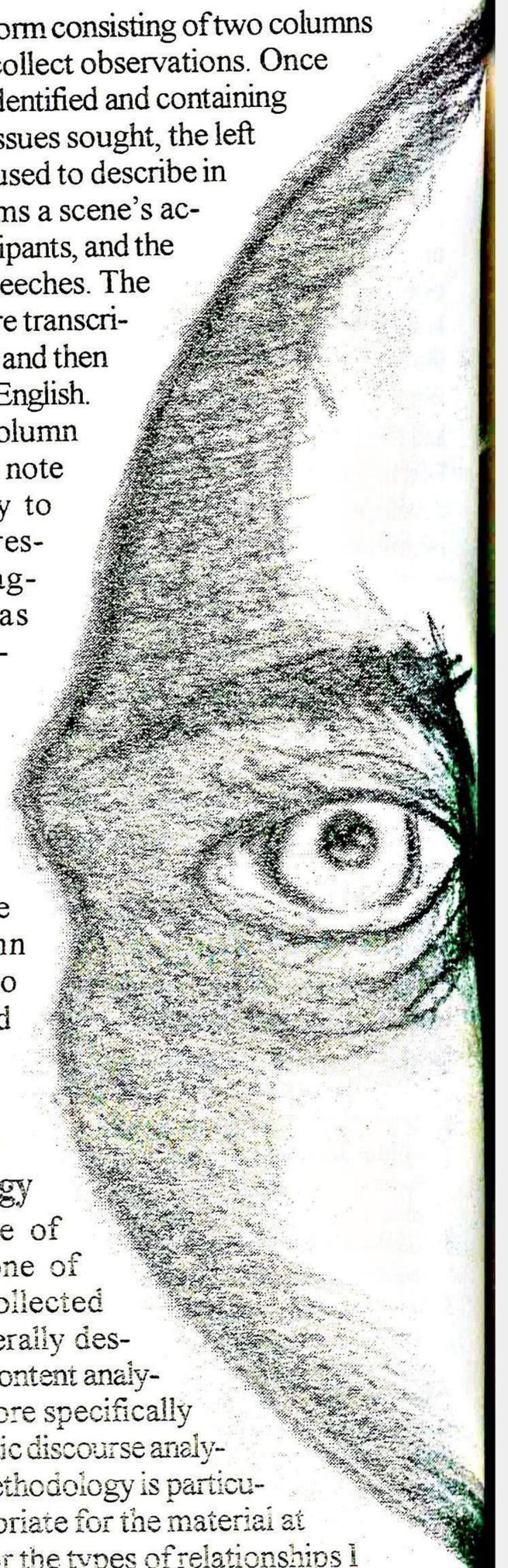
The telenovela 'Betty la Fea', broadcast by Telemundo from 8:00 PM to 9:00 PM on weekdays, was taped for a period covering from February 2 until its final episode on June 15, 2001. A number of episodes within that time frame were not taped, either because there was no broadcast or because of equipment malfunctions. The telenovela began its run on late 2000, so the initial part of the telenovela was not viewed, except fragmentarily, as some episodes included recapitulations of the initial period. Audience sites in the Internet were followed in order to gain a sense of the whole plot and to compensate for the episodes not seen. A total of 50 episodes were videotaped. The episodes taped included stages previous to the dramatic crisis, the period of crisis itself, and then the final denouement. All episodes obtained were then watched and coded for references and representations of female roles, male roles, social structures, stratification, and ethnic and minority representation. Additionally, fragments of speeches were closely examined in order to find references, allusions and metaphors that can be related to the Colombian historical context of the present and the recent past and to the ideological content that I seek to uncover.

Instrument

A simple form consisting of two columns was used to collect observations. Once a scene was identified and containing the types of issues sought, the left column was used to describe in synthetic terms a scene's action, its participants, and the respective speeches. The speeches were transcribed verbatim and then translated to English. The right column was used to note the category to which the respective fragment was thought to belong; notations about the analytical significance of the data recorded on the left column were also consigned there.

Analysis methodology

The type of analysis done of the data collected can be generally described as a content analysis but is more specifically a hermeneutic discourse analysis. Such methodology is particularly appropriate for the material at hand and for the types of relationships I want to establish. The method emphasizes the interpretation of language, as well as of silences and omissions within a text, while also situating the text and the interpreter within their socio-cultural traditions. For that reason, I have considered ne-



cessary and useful to provide for the reader extended sections on historical background, so that he/she can follow the analyses made and the connections established from the examination of the text under the light of the socio historical context. Another reason for the inclusion of historical background is that the hypotheses specifically seek to ascertain the connection between the content of the media piece and the historical context, as well as to elucidate the ideological content of the piece that responds to the historical moment.

Hermeneutics is a form of understanding that seeks to expose hidden meanings (Allen 1995; Kisiel 1985.)⁶⁰ In his writings on hermeneutics, Gadamer (1976)⁶¹ asserted the need for historical consciousness in carrying on such analyses, and stressed the importance of tradition, or background, in the effort to understand a text. In the positivist, empirical and Husserlian views of truth, the way to deal with the interference of a researcher's values is to bracket out his/her experiences. In the views of Heidegger and Gadamer,⁶² this is simply not possible: past experience cannot be shed, because that is what facilitates understanding. Maguire (1991),⁶³ in commenting on Gadamer's work, states that the engagement of the researcher from a definite point of view increases the ability to understand and interpret the content of a text. As for the possibility of prejudgment on the part of the researcher, Maguire adds that questioning the text helps the researcher transcend the potential limitations that the interference of his/her personal views may have. In such a way, the researcher's values, rather than being an obstacle, help provide contextual meaning.⁶⁴ In order to

60 As quoted in Byrne (undated document). The foregoing discussion of hermeneutics, and what follows, is based on Byrne, Michelle M. (undated). *Hermeneutics 101*. Found at http://www.coe.uga.edu/quig/proceedings/Quig98_Proceedings/byrne.html. Downloaded July 30, 2001. The author discusses the evolution of hermeneutics and the philosophical influences of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer.

61 Gadamer, H. (1976). *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum.

62 Byrne, Op. Cit.

63 Maguire, S. J. (1991). *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Criticism and Community*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Quoted in Byrne, Op. Cit.

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safeguard the validity of the conclusions drawn, the researcher's "lens of analysis"⁶⁵ used as well as his judgements must be made explicit enough. In that way, the Gadamerian methodology supports an interpretive content analysis as contrasted to a content analysis in which words and categories are universally defined.⁶⁶

Validity and reliability

Reliability of this type of analysis is difficult to obtain, given that rarely two researchers will arrive at the same conclusions, even if they were connected to the same cultural tradition and historical background. Validity, on the other hand, is increased by a close attention to convergence and triangulation of the data sources. In this case, such convergence is obtained with reference to historical sources and to analyses and commentary found in the press during the broadcast of this particular media piece. Validity is increased also by extensive quotations, when available, from field notes, interviews, etc.⁶⁷ In this study I have attempted to increase validity by exacting reference to the text analyzed, to other sources which have had access to the same media piece and that make explicit reference to it, and by paying close attention to what the extensive literature on media analysis have to say in relation to the issues studied here.

Data

The material that I will introduce as data for the analysis will consist, first, on a summary of the story line of the telenovela; to that, a brief examination of the economics of the media, as related to the telenovela genre will follow. Finally, to provide historical context for the connection between the telenovela's content and the socio historical situation of Colombia, I will go into a summarized exposition of the most relevant historical events with which I want to establish a connection to the telenovelas' content. Lastly, I will go into the analysis section itself. The

summary of the story line is by itself what appears to me to be the denotative content of the telenovela (*"the most specific or direct meaning ... in contrast to its figurative or associated meanings."*)⁶⁸ The analysis itself is what I would call the "alternative interpretation," which in this case aims at reading the underlying ideological content as related to current Colombian social reality and to Colombia's history. The attempt is not made to pass this interpretation as the only possible one, nor as the ultimate or definitive reading. It is only one of many possible readings, but a reading anyway that is based on a critical view of the media product as an ideological text.

Betty la fea's story line

In *Betty la Fea* (Betty The Ugly) its author has sought so break the traditional telenovela format of making a beautiful woman the female lead, within the Spanish-language soap opera genre. In the author's words, the telenovela is a genre "*whose golden rule is that the protagonist should be beautiful, pure and radiant, even in the worst of circumstances. [In this work I present] 'ugly people in the world of the beautiful. There are some who think that the rich are beautiful and the poor are ugly.'*"⁶⁹

With this gamble, the author indeed affords himself and the viewer interesting opportunities to question stereotypes of beauty and ugliness that are often related to class position. This happens in a land (Colombia) where most social events end with the election of a "Miss this" and a "Miss that" and where physical looks are a strong determinant of employment and indeed seem to be an index of class status. Opportunities also open to examine the role and position of women in a patriarchal society in which the dominant role of men is accepted as a given, and where the image of the "macho" male and the philandering and commanding Latin Casanova is a widely shared male identity.

64 Byrne, Op. Cit.

65 Byrne, Op. Cit.

66 Byrne, Op. Cit.

67 Ratcliff, Donald (undated). *Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research*. Found at [http:// don.ratcliff.net /qual/validity.html](http://don.ratcliff.net/qual/validity.html). Downloaded July 30, 2000.

68 Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000. *Denotation*. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation.

69 Gomez, Robert Andres. "*En el Pais de las Feas Betty Quiere Reinara*". El Universal.com. (<http://www.eud.com/2000/09/10/10401DD.shtml>) September 10, 2000. Retrieved February 6, 2001.

Without focusing on the present complex social and political situation of Colombia, the novel also manages to examine, if in a cryptic manner, issues of ethics and class, gender and ethnic stratification. Those issues are very relevant in a land seeping with corruption and constituted on the basis of the deep social cleavages of a rigidly stratified society marked by grand schemes of exclusion.⁷⁰ Colombia is currently mired in a 50 year-old-civil war that the great market for illegal drugs in the US and Europe has only made more complicated. The war and the crumbling social situation originate and are the result of the tight social and economic dominance of a small number of elite families and groups.

Immensely popular wherever it is being shown,⁷¹ even though the settings, with very few exceptions, are confined to interior shots and the *mise-en-scène* is an endless succession of dialogues in close quarters, the novel appears on the surface, denotative level, to be a liberal, pro-feminist and even progressive text. That is due to the depiction of the strength, solidarity and integrity of women of the lower classes and the apparent questioning of patriarchal patterns of male conduct. However, as is often the case in the media, the underlying argument seems to be that with individual hard work, the doors to success are open to the lower class. Indeed Betty, the protagonist, finally emerges as winner, both professionally and

sentimentally, and achieves the social mobility and the class standing that for many Colombians is just a mirage. She ends up married with her upper class tormentor and charming con man, thus consummating a fantasy love affair between the upper and lower classes.

The commercial success of *Betty la fea*

This telenovela has several «interesting» elements: (1) A seeming liberalism, in the assertion of the possibilities of upward mobility for the lower classes. (2) A seeming pro-feminist stance built on both the assertion of the ability of women as professionals and as human beings, and on mercilessly presenting the follies of men. (3) Lastly, what could be called an attempt to subvert the stereotypes of beauty and female behavior that are such important elements in the bourgeois culture in Latin America (this is not to say that the same does not occur in the US). It is these elements that are perhaps what have enthralled such vast audiences (estimated to be 80 million viewers per episode)⁷² and that have made this work an important source of profits.

The success of Latino telenovelas is not limited to Latin American audiences. A recent op-ed piece in *El Tiempo*, one of the main dailies in Colombia, commented that even stations in Rumania and Hungary had bought the rights for the broadcast.⁷³ Other Latin telenovela works have caught the attention of audiences in the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe and Russia.⁷⁴ De Urbina⁷⁵ reports that the biggest telenovela production companies are in Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela, but Colombia is also a powerhouse in the genre. De Urbina argues that lots of local color and typical La-

70 "To say it briefly, the Colombian country, understood as the unity of a territory and a human group, has never come to achieve the character of a true society if by the term is understood as a community of experience and ideals. The only thing we've had of a society is the presence of a hierarchization, which being purely formal, or by having no other content than the psychological, has found its true sustenance in violence. This means that the dominant groups, far from being the conductors of a civilizing enterprise, have centered their major energies in affirming their radical distinction in respect to profoundly despised masses, who, before, were castes of the land, and today form the populace. Their social predominance have consisted less in a directive function, than on the proof of a human difference, even defined in racial terms." Arrubla, Mario. *Introduction*, pp. 19; in Melo, Jorge Orlando (Ed.) (1978-1991). *Colombia Hoy: Perspectivas Hacia el Siglo XXI* Bogotá: Siglo XXI Editores.

71 Twenty-one countries, according to a press release by the originating entity, Radio Cadena Nacional, RCN TV. RCN.com (2001).

72 CNN En Español, *Llega a su fin en Colombia el Rodaje del Fenómeno Televisivo 'Betty, La Fea.'* Found at <http://cnnenespanol.com/2001/escena/04/30/betty.la.fea/index.html>. Retrieved May 1st, 2001.

73 D'Artagnan. *Cómo Matar a Betty la Fea*. *El Tiempo*, Colombia, April 15, 2001. (<http://eltiempo.com>) Retrieved April 15, 2001.

74 De Urbina, Araceli Ortiz and Isabel Lopez (1999). *Soaps With a Latin Accent*. UNESCO Courier. May 1999. Database: Academic Search Premier. Retrieved April 15, 2001.

75 De Urbina, Araceli, et al. (1999), *Ibid.*

tin American scenes and people are what make the genre so popular around the world. A sense of complicity and identification with the protagonists misfortunes, and with the ultimate triumph of love and justice, that "exists in this make-believe world and perhaps nowhere else," also contribute to the good reception telenovelas receive, she adds.

Telenovelas used to be produced mainly for the local consumer, with foreign sales representing only a small portion of the profits, but this situation has changed.⁷⁶ While most telenovelas are sold at differential prices per episode, ranging from US\$7,000 to Spain, and US\$50 to Zambia and Syria, *Betty la Fea* has turned to be a moneymaking machine, the golden goose, for RCN (Radio Cadena Nacional, National Radio Network). RCN is one of the few large conglomerates that if it does not monopolize, do "cartelize" Colombian telecommunications. The editorial columnist D'Artagnan, in *El Tiempo*, states that in two minutes of commercials this soap recouped its production costs,⁷⁷ while the content was sold uniformly at US\$15,600 per minute, "without taking into account disguised advertising for automobiles, telephones, and drinks that appear during the scenes."⁷⁸ In the US, during the sweeps season, Telemundo saw its ratings increase 150% on the sole strength of *Betty la Fea*, with 1.16 million viewers watching it; Telemundo's share of the viewing audience is 30% in prime time. Although Telemundo is at the time of this writing behind Univisión (the other large Spanish-language network in the US) in ratings, the media outlet (owned by Sony Pictures Entertainment and AT&T Liberty Media Group) had a 94% increase in sales, compared to 1999, and had

By hegemony, Gramsci defines the socialization process, in which ideas contained in symbolic and cultural practices orient people's thinking to accept a given reality and their roles in society as 'natural.

revenues to the tune of US\$175 million in the fourth quarter of 2000.⁷⁹

Telemundo's current prime time schedule is filled with melodramas. This is the case even though the chain had in 1997 decided to "clean house" and to present other types of programming.⁸⁰ They made this decision as a result of competition and marketing studies commissioned in 1997, in an effort to stem tumbling ratings, which indicated that US Hispanic audiences wanted less emphasis on melodramas.

The market, however, is only part of the history, says Daniel Mato⁸¹ in a study of the industry in Latin America: "although selling telenovelas on the international market is a major cultural industry, its economics are less important than its cultural impact."⁸² The audience's reception to *Betty la Fea* is hugely positive, from the point of view of business, and this is supported by the

proliferation of fan sites in the Internet, where frequent mentions are made of how handsome this one or the other actor is, and the like. What audiences make of the messages, overt or hidden, contained in these media products, is another issue. As Rogers points out, "although the mixed messages of soap operas may allow scholars to construct subversive readings, actual viewers fail to respond in this manner..."⁸³

76 De Urbina, Araceli, et al. (1999), *Ibid.*

77 A commercial's price in Colombia was between 17 and 22 million pesos or US\$11,000.

78 D'Artagnan, *Op. Cit.*

79 Freeman, Michel. *Telemundo Gains New Ground*. Electronic Media 12/11/2000 Vol. 19 issue 50. Database: Electronic Search Premier, retrieved April 15, 2001.

80 Galetto, Mike. *Telemundo Cleaning House in Prime Time* (1997). Electronic Media 07/21/97, Issue 30. Database: Electronic Search Premier, retrieved April 15, 2001.

81 Mato, Daniel (1999). *Telenovelas: Transnacionalización de la Industria y Transformaciones del Género*, in N. García Canciani. *Industrias Culturales e Integración Latinoamericana*. México: Grijalbo Publishers, 1999. Cited in De Urbina, *Op. Cit.*

82 Mato, Daniel, *Ibid.*

83 Rogers, Deborah D. *Daze of Our Lives: The Soap Opera as Feminine Text*. *Journal of American Culture*, 14: winter 1991, pp. 325.

One of the first impressions the critical viewer gets in watching *Betty la Fea* is how far removed it is from Colombian reality. The telenovela seemingly contains no reference whatsoever to the great social conflicts that nowadays engulf that society, especially when compared to another telenovela that was being broadcast immediately following, *Por Qué Diablos?*⁸⁴ where the opposite was true. My own first reaction was to ask about the realism or fantasy of *Betty La Fea*. After a careful viewing, I began to uncover that social reality was being addressed indirectly, metaphorically, as much by direct allusion as by the absence of what was not mentioned. Issues of content in media products, of course, have to be considered beyond the merely elementary level of realism or the absence of it. Several levels of content may be present, one of them at the level of the denoted codification that Hall calls the "preferred" reading, and the many interpretations that viewers can make, the "alternative" readings.

Betty the beautiful and Colombia the ugly

As had been made clear in the many articles that *Betty la Fea* has inspired as media phenomenon, the telenovela apparently embodies "the ideals and values that Colombians yearn for, but find so lacking in their society today,"⁸⁵ including loyalty, honesty, honor and peace. An episode in which Betty rejected a US\$80,000 kickback "was described as the moral discourse of the decade."⁸⁶ It was said also that the drama breaks with all the stereotypes of the Latin American melodrama, by including the critique of female stereotypes. Males, in contrast, are presented as corruptible, neurotic and womanizing.⁸⁷ The telenovela's author asserted, "this is a different

Colombia, one that is not known, because there are many Colombians who are not armed, who do not live by killing nor from drug trafficking, but who have, in quotations, a normal life in the middle of all the chaos."⁸⁸

Issues of race and class

Throughout the literature review, I emphasized class and gender, and to a lesser degree, race. I will deal here with the race issue. A significant amount of work done on the US media deals with a marked reliance on Latino stereotypes. Stereotypes are often related to ethnic and racial differences and seek to legitimate the placement of subordinated groups in a given social position. This position is usually in a place removed from the mainstream of American society, and often seeks to construct the other as inassimilable or assimilable as long as they reject their native ethnic cultural patterns and adopt the values and behaviors of the Anglo. Research on the media is even more often concerned with the absence of Latinos from media representations. Remarkably, *Betty La Fea*, although not lacking in stereotypes, contains strikingly few negative ones. For that reason, in my examination, I will not emphasize stereotypes. Race is another matter.

In analyzing a product from a society other than the US, it is obvious that concerns of race may take a different form, if anything, because the same analyses that are made of racial and ethnic issues in the US do not necessarily apply verbatim elsewhere. Racial issues have, in each society, their own dynamics that are closely related to the local historical development of race relations. There is in *Betty la Fea* but one black character, a member of the Clique of the Ugly. She is Mariana, whose sole distinguishing cultural mark is that she sees the future, one of the many attributes with which blacks are stereotyped, besides being noisy, morally lax, sexually promiscuous and even animalistic. She is represented as just one more of the Clique. The implication, it seems, is that blacks are not treated differently and had been incorporated into Colombian society. As a matter of fact, the conventional wisdom, and what is taught in

84 A title that I would translate as *Why in Hell?*

85 Pratt, Timothy (2000). *An Ugly Duckling Steals Colombian's Hearts*. Christian Science Monitor, 01/25/2000, Vol. 92 issue 47 pp. 7. Database: Electronic Search Premier, retrieved April 15, 2001.

86 CNN En Español.com, March 23, 2000. *Los Colombianos Pierden el Sueño por Betty, la Fea*. (<http://cnnenespanol.com/2001/escena/03/23/fea/>), retrieved February 6, 2001.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

schools, is that Colombia is a "mestizo" country, where a sort of what the Brazilian Freyre puts forwards as the «racial democracy» theory has taken place.⁸⁹ The black population in Colombia, which originated from a sizable number of slaves that were brought in during the era of the Spanish colony, was emancipated approximately three decades after independence from Spain. They had begun to be offered freedom since the beginning of the wars of independence in the 1810's, mainly because they were needed as soldiers. A sizable number chose to fight on the side of the Spanish.

Important slaveholding interests vehemently opposed freedom for the slaves, until a liberal revolution in the mid-19th century needed them, again, to fight in a civil war, and attempted to break the back of slaveholding interests. Since emancipation in the middle 1800s, it can be said that the blacks have officially disappeared, meaning that they are not counted anymore as blacks.⁹⁰ Given the Spanish propensity to amalgamate with the Indians, and even with blacks, not because of lack of prejudice but because of the lack of suitable women, indeed there was considerable mixing of the races. That does not mean that prejudice and exclusion ended. The descendants of the Spanish founded Colombia after the independence from Spain, and, for all intents and purposes, the same class of rich landowners and slaveholders with their distinctions of caste, blood and race continued in power.

Throughout Colombia's republican history, factions of the same class have always held control, and many times they have resorted to war among

themselves over economic interests but never over class interests. Current conflicts, in which the seigniorial state and its repressive institutions are challenged by left insurgencies of rural and peasant origin, and which amount to a civil war that has gone on for half a century in different reincarnations, have more of the character of a class conflict. Illegal drugs are only the latest twist that has come to make matters even more complicated.

The drug trade was initially a middle and upper class enterprise that enriched many, buffering the effects of chronic economic differentiation and intensifying the chronic and traditional levels of corruption. Both the leftist insurgencies and their sworn enemies, the right-wing paramilitaries use the drug trade to finance their operations.

Ultimately, the conflicts present in Colombia's society today can be traced in their origin to the remote times in which the republic was created. In the social schemes fraught by the inheritors of the Spanish to govern what amounted

Within cultural studies, subcultures are viewed
as any coherent group that defines itself as
outside the cultural mainstream along cleavages
of gender, ethnicity, class, and others.

to a confederation of large haciendas, Blacks, peasants, small landholders and anyone not belonging by blood or allegiance to the ruling class represented the lower echelon. In his studies of Brazilian race relations, Freyre and other students of slavery⁹¹ advance the thesis that in Latin America slaves received better treatment than in Anglo Colonies, an argument based on the abundance of formally enacted laws and on the good intentions of the Catholic Church. Instead, studies show that such laws were only a formality, written but not followed. Additionally, given the more than relative isolation of most of the slaveholding areas, slave owners were usually able to get away with all sorts of mistreatment and abuse. Rare but egre-

89 See Carl N. Degler (1971). *Neither Black nor White, Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 6.

90 Which has a double implication: on one hand, it denotes that race no longer is an indicator of belonging to a society, as compared with the fixation on race prevalent in other societies, for example, the US. On the other hand, it masks or hides the continuing importance of race, and makes it difficult to evaluate whether deracialization has made any progress.

91 Among them Frank Tannenbaum (1947). *Slave and Citizen*, NY: (No editorial House); Stanley M. Elkins (1959). *Slavery, A problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. Chicago: (No Editorial House); and Gilberto Freyre (1946). *The Masters and the Slaves* (1946). NY: (No Editorial House); all three cited in Carl N. Degler (1971). *Neither Black nor White* (Op. Cit.).

gious cases are documented of blatant abuses, permitting one to suspect that the slave system in Colombia was far from benign. Once emancipation took place, many former slaves took to the mountains and to the remotest areas, for example, in the Chocó, where slaveholding was extensive and where the more dismal indexes of development are found nowadays. In that remote land of jungles and dense tropical forests, of a climate that is humid, hot and insalubrious, and an area of never-ending rainfalls that borders Panamá, many blacks hoped in vain that whites would not ever again reach them. Also, blacks generally remained along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, where considerable race mixing goes on. Although this study is not concerned with Colombian race relations, an issue that I have partially researched elsewhere,⁹² it can be said with confidence that blacks and their descendants have been historically the object of extreme discrimination and exclusion.

The presentation of a single black character among a cast that is completely non-black, as an equal-time participant in the *Clique of the Ugly's* antics, seems to make the argument that blacks have been incorporated, and I would argue that they are not. Besides, this participatory fantasy seems to elide the whole history of Black exclusion. By this I do not mean that it is not possible for a black to have social mobility, which amounts in this case just to have a job, to be educated, or even to belong to the middle class. Incorporation, like anywhere else, remains conditional on adopting mainstream behaviors and demeanor, and on shedding every cultural marker. Thus, the Mariana character, by abstaining from saying much about blacks, says a lot. Perhaps she is "a good black," like a character in *Por Qué Diablos?* said about one of the two black characters that appeared there: "He is a good black, not like the rest of them." The utterance implies that granted individual exceptions blacks are collectively bad, and articulates a feeling that is, I suspect, widely shared. On the other hand, the inclusion of this character in *Betty La Fea* presents the racial situation as it should ideally be, which is, I figure, a good thing. That is, blacks should be incorporated as equals

because they are just like any other person and citizen among the many types that can be found in a society like Colombia.

Issues of class and gender

I have quoted the telenovela's scriptwriter saying that he attempted to break the mold of Latino telenovelas in questioning the stereotypes of beauty. This intention is of course, praiseworthy and even original. At the same time the script seems indeed to take a pro-feminine stance. Women are presented as capable, active and engaged social actors, and as responsible professionals that are successful in their endeavors. Too bad that Betty ends up beautiful, in a telling concession to precisely those stereotypes and molds that the script attempted to break from. This outcome is symbolic of what is required for the lower social rungs to accede to economic and social equality: to become part of the "beautiful people," even if that is just another fantasy. The trust of the argument is that Betty and Nicolás,⁹³ two members of the "poor but honest" class, socially awkward and isolated, have access to upward mobility through their individual effort and capacity exemplified in their higher education. In a country in which only a small percentage of the population have college degrees,⁹⁴ and where with the exceptions of a few good public universities, college is a depressing, costly and elitist business, they are quite exceptional. They are symbols of the hard work and individual effort required to at least get a job as a secretary, even when you have a doctorate like the novella's protagonist. The

93 The original version of this work, presented as a Masters Thesis in Social Research at Hunter College/CUNY, New York, contains a detailed story line that explains the characters and roles. It was intended as a description of the plot for Anglo readers not familiar with the *telenovela*. It was also an attempt to familiarize the reader with the character and plot elements to be discussed in the following sections. The story line has been omitted here in attention to considerations of space. For that reason, the foregoing discussion may seem at times awkward, as it deals with elements that have not been properly introduced here. With the author's apologies, the interested reader is kindly directed to consult the original work at the College's library.

94 The official Colombian statistics do not contain information on the proportion of college-educated population, but I estimate it to be around 6% of the population.

92 Castellanos, Alvaro (1997). *Issues of Slavery and Race Relations in Colombia*. Unpublished paper.

emphasis on individual effort also signifies the discouragement of collective endeavors related to class advancement; any efforts in that direction are discouraged, and are currently punished by either an official or an anonymous bullet.

That philosophy of individualistic advancement is articulated by Hugo Lombardi, the fashion designer, himself a member of an oppressed homosexual minority which in Colombian society is not allowed to "come out." Due to his class position, the successful Lombardi acts as an oppressor with the company's employees, especially those of lower rank, and with Betty, the protagonist. In Lombardi's skewed worldview, Betty "the monster" (as Lombardi refers to Betty) certainly does not belong to the world of the beautiful, i.e., to Lombardi's class, nor literally, to the world of beauty and beautiful models that always surrounds him. Referring to Armando Mendoza, the company's president and eminent lout, whom he hates and despises, he says to Armando's mother, after calling him "a beast:" "Oops! Pardon, your son is not a beast. He is a despot and a tyrant, but not a beast. Well, each person elects to be whatever he/she wants to be. I'm sure you gave him a good education... too bad that he didn't take advantage of it." And turning to Marcela (Armando's fiancée and a shareholder in the company): "What certainly is unconscionable is that there are women that fall in love with such specimens."

The seemingly pro-feminist stance can be problematized also. A case in hand is that of Betty and Armando. Armando Mendoza and his friend Calderón plotted to do Betty tremendous injury, for all intents and purposes amounting to sexual abuse, almost amounting to rape.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Armando Mendoza ends up "redeemed" by love, and Betty ends up marrying him, in this way, as Rogers' finds, "*reconciling women to traditional feminine roles.*"⁹⁶ According to Rogers, the "*reformed rake*" is a familiar soap opera plot subtext, which reinterprets male violence as romance,

95 Mendoza and Calderón conspire for Mendoza to pretend he is in love with Betty so she helps cover the fraud they are committing with the company's assets. In the course of this plot Mendoza falls in love with Betty. See note 93 above.

96 Rogers, Deborah D. (1991) "Daze of Our lives..." Op. Cit., pp. 326.

leading women to deal with their fears by decoding male brutality as love.

The many instances of physical and psychological abuse against women in the telenovela present also opportunities for analysis and critique. An example of physical violence is, for example, when Armando grabs Patricia by the hair to tell her that she is still his secretary, even though he is no longer the company's president. The ultimate rewards and lack of punishment that such behaviors receive in the broadcast serve to legitimize the many instances of psychological violence and abuse, which are numerous. These include Betty's father's oppression of his wife; Carlos Valencia's treatment of Patricia as a sexual object and his suggestions to prostitute herself to solve her economic troubles; Hugo Lombardi's outbursts against the Clique of the Ugly; and Mario Calderón's assessment of Betty as less than a woman because she is "ugly" and his overall view of women as sexual objects.⁹⁷ In other words, the possibilities for emancipatory readings and the originality of the work remain undeveloped and are ultimately undermined by the characters' outcomes. Violence against women, physical, verbal and psychological, remains unexamined and worse, are rewarded, and the possibilities for critique opened up by the theme are foregone. No alternative, positive or equalizing behaviors are modeled, and when they are, it is by the losers, for example, by the characters of Nicolas and Michel, two sensitive males without macho hangouts and who are the only ones that do not pursue the subordination of women.

The work is constructed in several dichotomies: upper class / lower class; pretty / ugly; rich / poor; old / young; ethics / corruption; pardon / vengeance; father / son; gentlemen / lawyers; foreign / nati-

97 For example in the following dialogue: Armando's mother has asked Calderón to see that Armando does not get into more bar brawls over Betty and that he forgets her. Calderón suggests to Armando that he has to go out with women. Armando Asks: "Are you suggesting that because I go out with a woman I will forget Betty?" Calderón responds: "Not with a woman, with women! 90-60-90, spectacular hair, eyes of every color, divine legs, fleshy and sensual lips." Piqued, Armando says: "So you mean that Betty is not a woman?" Calderón answers: "A woman? No, she is not; I mean, yes, I can't deny it; that is what her documents of identification say."

ve; fiction / reality; male / female; dominant / subordinate. Each of these dichotomies contains a side that is in one way or the other posited as good and belonging to the upper class, the other as bad and as an attribute of the lower class. The main overt cleavage is between the world of the beautiful and the world of the ugly as a metaphor that masks class cleavages. The beautiful are the upper class, the rich, the side of what is good and old and sanctioned by tradition, the side that constructs social order, and to which the lower class can only aspire, but to which they must be subjected to any case.

The "ugly people," whose ugliness is not only physical but social and psychological, can be upwardly mobile if they have, first, the appropriate credentials that qualify them as apt aspirants to the upper class,⁹⁸ and second, if they adopt the ways of the "beautiful." In the novella, this is apparently a question of make-up and physical appearance. But anyone knows that no effort to ape the rich nor to comply with their demands will get equality of opportunity. Among the upper class, no education or preparation of any kind is needed; it is enough to appear to have them, e.g., by being upper class you automatically become a "doctor." Furthermore, the elites are on top already, by tradition, inheritance, hard work, intelligence, and any attempts to enter the elite by those who do not have the attributes of birth and tradition represents a challenge to what is established, natural and good, the status quo.

So far I have analyzed the level of the obvious and the denotated, the reading that is advisable and preferred, and the one that most audiences get, and I have tried to show that behind the innocent façade of entertainment there is a darker side. Now I intend to show how some of the main subjects and themes of this telenovela can be extended to be metaphorically understood as representing Colombia's social structures and social actors, its conflicts and troubles, as well as the preferred solutions and alternatives advanced by the dominant groups in their attempts to fend off the grave challenges to their dominance that they are confronting nowadays.

Colombia is a deeply stratified society, with social cleavages based on systems of exclusion that include birth, family name, area of origin, class, gender, and last, but not least, race.⁹⁹ High levels of concentration of wealth and high levels of poverty, limited access to education, a repressive state and high levels of corruption that, up to recent times, guaranteed to any public official the amassing of wealth at the expense of the public treasure, all have contributed to the conflicts that led to the current civil war. Peasants in the countryside have been dispossessed from their lands and forced to immigrate to the cities at many times during the country's history.¹⁰⁰

Fiction follows reality

It is unavoidable that such a social context will have direct or indirect influence on media content.

99 This is a matter of public knowledge; for example, a source of very general information as the Encarta Encyclopaedia is specific on this point: "Colombian society is divided between the upper and lower classes, with a large and growing gap between them. A middle class developed during the 20th century, but it is still quite small. Many of the attitudes that led to Colombia's sharp class divisions originated in 16th-century Spain and became ingrained in Colombian society during the colonial period. Family lineage, inherited wealth, and racial background continue to be powerful determinants of status. Economic progress during the 20th century has only slightly reduced the concentration of political, social, and economic power in the hands of the small upper class. As a result of these social divisions, Colombia has experienced a period of ongoing political violence since the 1950s. By the late 1990s, leftist rebels committed to change in the economic and social system controlled much of the southeastern countryside. At the same time, right-wing paramilitary groups supporting the traditional power structure became active in the northwestern regions. Many thousands of Colombians died or were displaced from their homes as a result of the conflict." Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000. Colombia. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. See also Arrubla, Mario (1978-1991), Op. Cit.

100 The first large-scale dispossession took place in 1852, when "resguardos" —lands collectively owned by indigenous tribes— were dissolved, to create a rural proletariat, and to bring those lands to the real estate market. The lands were sold at advantageous prices to members of the ruling elite. During the many periods of civil war throughout the country's history, hostilities and violence have been used as a tool to dispossess small landholders. Melo, Jorge Orlando, Ed. (1991). *Colombia Hoy: Perspectivas Hacia el Siglo XXI*. Bogotá: Siglo XXI Editores.

98 Arrubla, Mario (1978-1991). Op. Cit. *Introduction*, pages 19-21. In Melo, Jorge Orlando, Ed. *Colombia Hoy: Perspectivas Hacia el Siglo XXI*. Bogotá: Siglo XXI Editores.

In my alternative interpretation of *Betty La Fea*, I will emphasize how views on ethics, on the responsibility of the generations, and on ways to solve the social conflict are articulated in speeches that are apparently unrelated in every way to Colombia's situation. At the same time, there seems to be in the whole telenovela a view that I would summarize as "How Colombian people can be saved from themselves by falling in love again with the oligarchy who sank the country in the first place." For this to make sense it is necessary to consider that in certain occasions the telenovela's protagonists and antagonists and Ecomoda, the main and legitimate owner of the wealth that is disputed, can be understood, metaphorically, to represent Colombia and the Colombian upper and lower classes. One of the scenes where this metaphorical connection can be made is one that I would describe as follows:

The company's public relations consultant, Doña Catalina, who organizes the yearly fashion collection events, notices that Betty has problems, and observes the bad treatment that Betty receives from all executives. At one point, she runs into Armando and Betty kissing. Once the plot unravels, Betty relates the whole history to "Doña" Catalina. . . Catalina undertakes the transformation of Betty from an ugly duckling into a beautiful woman. Betty's shadow of a moustache is taken away, her thick eyebrows are shaped, and her hair, which Betty keeps over her brow plastered with heavily-applied hair spray, is brushed back. A beautiful Betty begins to emerge. In the meantime Betty is in mourning for her personal tragedy. Since she already had had in the past a bad experience with a man, this new experience confirms to her that she is not made for love. In addition to the physical transformation of Betty, Catalina tries to transform her psychologically, helping her to get over the pain, and eventually, she takes Betty to a paradisiacal place in an island close to Cartagena. They both get into the sea and Betty is instructed that she will talk to Armando and forgive him so she can get on with her life. In a fantastical scene, Armando indeed appears coming from the sea; Armando and Betty talk, and she forgives him.

That is what I would call the scene of "forgive and forget" and the speech that Catalina gives Betty goes like this (my translation):

Catalina: "... *We are here because you will have to return... hard days will come, you'll have to confront a past full of offenses, a past where he is present ... he who made you suffer, the man who is the reason why you are here. You need to take control of yourself, to be able to get over the hate, the resentment and the (wish for) vengeance... to be able to achieve an equilibrium, to be able to continue in the midst of so many memories, of so many injuries, to be able to gain interior peace and not to make a mistake. To avoid falling into the play and counterplay of vengeance, you need to forgive.*" **Betty:** "But I don't want to."

Catalina: "You have to confront him, tell him all that you always wanted to say; he is going to listen."¹⁰¹

The role of "Doña" Catalina, a member of the ruling elite who has a social conscience, is that of mediator of conflicts. If Armando Mendoza is understood as representative of the ruling class, and in this scene Betty is understood as representing Colombia, the speech is an admonition to Colombia and to the lower classes. The admonition is that "to confront the past full of injuries and offenses" and to address the "loss of control," the lack of "interior peace," to "get over the hates, resentment and vengeance", and "not to make a mistake," the upper class, the ultimate cause of every injury and offense, has to be forgiven. Furthermore, that class "will listen."¹⁰²

The problems of the country are, in a very direct way, alluded to in a speech that takes place in the meeting between Roberto Valencia and Eze-

101 **Catalina:** "... estamos aquí porque usted tendrá que regresar (a Bogotá)... vendrán días muy duros, tendrá que enfrentar un pasado lleno de ofensas, un pasado en donde está el ... que la hizo sufrir, el hombre por el cual usted terminó aquí. Usted necesita tomar control de sí misma, para poder pasar por encima de los odios, del rencor y las venganzas, para poder lograr el equilibrio, poder seguir en medio de tanto recuerdo, de tantas heridas, para poder lograr la paz interior y no equivocarse, para no caer en el juego de las venganzas, necesita perdonar." **Betty:** "No quiero." **Catalina:** "Tiene que enfrentarlo, dígame todo lo que siempre ha querido; él la va a escuchar."

102 I leave unaddressed here the dominant/subordinate relationship that the title of «Doña» implies, on one hand, and the powers of 'magic' that have to be used for that forgiveness to come.

quiet Pinzón. On that occasion, corruption and the state of the country is blamed on the new generations. Also, wealth is articulated as originating exclusively in hard work. Pinzón, Betty's father, who is a CPA, has come to talk to "doctor" Valencia, who began his wealth as a shopkeeper and is not a doctor at all.

Roberto Valencia: Well, Señor Pinzón....

Pinzón: [Pinzón talks about his curriculum vita, which has neither "stain" nor "pollution."]¹⁰³ *"I have never committed an indelicacy... my honesty, my honorability ... The Pinzónes, maybe we are not moneyed people, but we are people in good standing."*¹⁰⁴ *We will never belong to the hordes of parasites and of the corrupted that have this country in shambles, that live at the expense of the rest. Never would I use the lack of money or hunger, to commit crimes. I'm sure that you raised your company with your work and your sweat, that is why nobody can come to snatch it from you."*

There may be, of course, many wealthy Colombians who have made their wealth exclusively with hard work, and who in the process have created work and thus, have been a positive force in society. But this ignores the many others whose fortunes began with slavery, ex-

Power relations are reified through "common sense," which results in a masquerading of power relations as ahistorical, natural and unquestionable.

ploitation of Indian labor, or with the expropriation of land or its de facto possession. What follows continues in the same tone of morality, only that now, the blame for corruption is put on the new generations:

Pinzón: *"People like you and me ... there remain but few. [People of] today's generation think that they know it all, because they have studied a bit more. See how easily they lose their bearings, and worse of all, their scruples... [We] have to be on top of our sons/daughters."*

Roberto Mendoza: *"Definitely, yes. These troubled times are very difficult for people of our generation."*

The young... they walk all over people of our generation, walk over every principle, are ruled by ethics that I do not comprehend."

Pinzón: *"...and that is a consequence of the decomposed state that we live in the country... corruption itself is corrupted. If we had been on top of these children¹⁰⁵ this would not had happened. And let me remind you, that the devil is dirty, and have no [allegiances of] social class,¹⁰⁶ which is the worst."*

Roberto Mendoza: *"To raise children¹⁰⁷ in this society is a lifetime job, because at any age they are vulnerable. The only thing we can leave to them is a good name."*

"Corruption is itself corrupted..." Corruption which took place before, when a public appointment was, for all means and purposes, a license to sack the public treasury and a guarantee of wealth, was not corrupted, it was legitimate corruption, morally justified. Only the "new corruption" is condemnable. Furthermore, in a denial of historicity, the fault is to be laid upon the new generations. Let me quote in here a response that a young popular singer, Shakira (winner of the year 2001 Grammy award) makes

103 "Mi hoja de vida impoluta." The idea of the lack of stain and pollution can also be related to its colonial antecedents. During the colonial period, the natives not of Spanish or noble origin were said to have "blood of the earth." The Spanish Crown was persuaded to institute legal proceedings called "procesos de gracias al sacar" («thank you for cleaning,» or the like) in which "blood of the earth," a socially doubtful origin, was cleansed.: "The stain of having 'blood of the land' had to be eliminated by paying expensive fees ordered by Royal decree (Real Cédula) in 1790; the process was euphemistically called "gracias al sacar" ("thank you for taking it out"). **Jaramillo** Uribe Jaime (1991) *Etapas y Sentido de la Historia de Colombia* (Stages and Significance of the History of Colombia), in **Melo**, Jorge Orlando, Ed. *Colombia Hoy: Perspectivas Hacia el Siglo XXI* (1978-1991) Bogotá: Siglo XXI Editores. Page 34.

104 "Gentes de bien."

105 "Muchachos."

106 "El diablo es puerco y no tiene clase social."

107 "Hijos."

to that argument, in a song called *Where Are the Thieves*.¹⁰⁸ The song summarizes the perceptions of the younger generation about the state of chaos, violence, corruption and indiscriminate assassinations in which they have grown up. It is also a relevant example of local socio-economic and historical conditions affecting art's and the media's content. Shakira sees corruption, thieves and assassins everywhere, even in herself, indicating to the listener the degree of moral decay to which the country has arrived. Furthermore, the singer asks the listener to look upon him/herself and to think whether everyone shares part of the blame.

Where are the thieves?

They've been seen around and about They've been seen on the roofs taking walks around Paris judging in the courts.

With powdered noses with a tie or in blue jeans They've been seen on all magazine covers without anything else to say. Where are the thieves? Where is the murderer? Maybe over there rolling around On the neighbor's patio. And what happens if it's them? And what happens if it's me? The one playing this guitar or the one singing this song... The one singing this song... They've been seen on their knees sitting down or crouching, standing up and giving lectures in every position... Preaching in the churches, even giving concerts they've been seen at cocktail parties, all of them handing out government positions.¹⁰⁹

This text, if anything, is an alternative reading of Colombia's social situation and a clear response to those who seek to place blame and fault where it doesn't belong. One wonders whether the traditional audience for this type of music, the young, is led to think the way the song intends, or whether, instead, they think the song is funny, that it "rocks," and that the artist is talking about stealing candy. The awareness of the younger generation, of course, cannot be discounted beforehand.

108 Shakira Mebarak R. (1998). *Dónde Están los Ladrones?*. Sony Music Entertainment (Colombia) S.A.

In the dialogue cited above, Pinzón is shown as a member of the lower classes who depends on the god will of the elites for a livelihood. Also apparent in his dialogue with Mendoza are the subordinate/dominant relations that this entails. The dialogue illustrates the good standing in which the subordinate group must be for the elite to confer its favor. The middle class apes and has to adopt these norms and values in order to be able to get ahead, to have access to a measure of opportunity and employment. There's also in this dialogue the construction of the young generations, of women¹¹⁰ and of the whole country as children who cannot manage their own affairs. The emphasis on ho-

109 ¿DONDE ESTAN LOS LADRONES? (1998)

Los han visto por ahí
los han visto en los tejados
dando vueltas en París
condenando en los juzgados

Con la nariz empolvada
de corbata o de blue jeans
los han visto en las portadas, todas
sin mas nada que decir.

Dónde están los ladrones?
dónde está el asesino?
Quizá allá revolcándose
en el patio del vecino.

Y que pasa si son ellos?
Y que pasa si soy yo?
La que toca esta guitarra
o la que canta esta canción
la que canta esta canción...

Los han visto de rodillas
sentados o de cuclillas
parados dando lecciones
en todas la posiciones
predicando en las iglesias
hasta ofreciendo conciertos
los han visto en los cocteles, todos
repartiendo ministerios.

Translation found at Pages / ivillage.com / shakiratranslations / shakira translations / id10.html, April 2001. I have modified the translation somewhat without distorting the intended meaning.

110 Pinzón treats his daughter like a child. In the dialogue between Pinzón and Mendoza, they refer to their offspring as children who have to be constantly watched. Betty's French pretender refers to her as "a girl ... (una niña)... who is amazed at the world."

nor,¹¹¹ family name¹¹² shows up to what point the standards of the upper class have been internalized. The uncritical acceptance of the norms and values of the upper classes evidences also the role the middle class has in propping up the system, not only with the reproduction of class relations but of ideology. No one would ever condone laziness or the lack of riches to excuse the commission of crimes. But when as society is chronically hungry, lacks every mean to and opportunity to maintain itself and has to rely on the handouts of others in order to sustain it, that is an indication of a failed society. In such cases, as the many examples of the last decades show, nations have been known to rise and remove by any means necessary the regimes that kept them in such state.

In this work I have attempted to show that behind the seemingly harmless, innocent and entertaining content of a media product there can be many levels of interpretation, including alternative interpretations that do not necessarily conform to the meaning intended or preferred by the producer. Although a media product cannot be unambiguously read as either supporting or criticizing social relationships that are based on established and accepted structures of power, it is obvious that behind the overt, denotated level

there is another level in which ideological operations take place. At that level, media content covertly addresses and reproduces, through appropriately positioned speakers, the rationalizations, legitimations and spin of the ruling classes in their effort to legitimate and prop up the basis of social order. Through the internalized values of producers and artists as socially situated actors and through presenting a consensus view of the status quo, the text/novella not only seeks but also probably succeeds in helping assuage and defuse the legitimate collective aspirations of the dominated classes. Power relations of subordination/domination are presented as natural and legitimate. The dominant mores are also rewarded and modeled, as in the final outcomes of *Betty la Fea*, where the bad deeds of the dominant characters, symbolic representatives of the hegemonic class, go unpunished and are instead rewarded. With such embellishments, any critical stance the author may have pretended to have is frustrated. The common viewer has the opportunity to make alternative interpretations and critical readings, but while audience research in that respect is lacking, one could hypothesize that the producer's preferred interpretation is the same one made by most of the audience.

111 Later on, upon returning back home, Pinzón says, "The issue of honor is resolved. " The appreciation of the ruling class is thus insured.

112 "I went to talk with Roberto Valencia y Cifuentes." Valencia's name has been transmuted into an old-style Spanish family name, emphasizing family name and implying "noble" origin.

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